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Allegiances

ICECLAN

Leader
(In charge of the clan and the territory they live in)
Blizzardstar- a medium furred all white tom with blue eyes.

Deputy
(Helps the leader with decisions; organizes patrols and helps keep the clan busy)
Hailstorm- a black and silver tom with blue eyes.

Medicine Cat
(Heals the clan and interprets the will of Starclan)
Brokensong- a brown and black spotted she-cat with one green eye. The other is missing, ripped from its socket when she was an apprentice.

Warriors
(Cats who protect and defend the clan; in charge of hunting and patrolling the territory)
Sootsplash- a white tom with splotches of black, has green eyes.

Quietstorm- a white and black splotched she-cat with blue eyes.

Aspenclaw- a slim but still toned brown and white tom with green eyes.

Foxstreak- an orange tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Elkleap- a large and powerful brown and black tom with yellow eyes. (Apprentice: Shimmerpaw)

Meadowshine- a shy tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes.

Ashcloud- a gray tom with red tinted eyes.

Weaseltail- an all brown tom with yellow eyes. (Apprentice:

Lionpaw)

Appleleaf- a cream and brown striped she-cat with yellow eyes.

Sweetmind- a small framed calico she-cat with green eyes.

Pineheart- a tufty all black tom with green eyes.

Frostfeather- a sleek furred all white she-cat with green eyes.

Smallfire- a orange and white mottled tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentices
(Cats older than 6 moons; training to become warriors)
Shimmerpaw- a dusky gray she-cat with blue eyes.

Lionpaw- a russet orange and gray spotted she-cat with green eyes.

Elders
(Retired warriors; too old or frail to hunt and fight)
Redfern- a thin furred orange she-cat with green eyes.

Willowleaf- a long furred cream she-cat with hazy green eyes.

Nightvolt- a gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Wildflight- a very skinny brown she-cat with green eyes.

Prologue {Edited}

A small group of cats sat, huddled at the bank of a rounded pond. They looked around at each other with apprehension. Surely they had not gathered to exchange good news. The largest of the group, a powerful gray tom, stood to speak.

"But I thought the forest wanted peace! Now you're saying that it will..." Stormsurge's voice trailed off. A similar gray she-cat, named Quickwater, stood a few paces away to answer him.

"Stormsurge, I know you must be confused. We are all confused. But the forest must keep its balance," the gray she-cat warned. She cast her gaze over the others who had assembled and knew that each one was equally disturbed by this news.

"I can see it," an orange and brown she-cat named Lilybloom muttered as she leaned forward to peer into the water. A calico, Spottedrose, sat at her side and stretched her delicate nose forward to stare deeper into its depths.

"What Quickwater says about the forest keeping its balance is true. The trees have fed on the blood of our Clanmates for many generations. Now that its supply has run dry, it will thirst for more," the orange and brown mottled she-cat muttered.

Spottedrose continued to stare into the water. Perhaps she hoped to find an answer in its murky depths. Quickwater dipped her head and turned to whisper something to the cat that sat next to her.

As the group whispered amongst themselves, a vision began to unfold within the ripples in the pond. The hazy figures of cats cowered in the center of the pool, their eyes darted back and forth, their pelts spiked with fear. A furious white storm of snowflakes circled the apparitions, thick enough to shield them from the shadows near the banks of the pond.

The StarClan cats had grown silent, mesmerized by the vision on

the face of the water. Time felt suspended as the foggy figures remained behind the comforting wall of white, feathery flakes. Suddenly, the bushes behind the StarClan cats parted and a chestnut brown tabby burst into the open.

He bolted over to the edge of the group and started to push his way through. "I'm not late, am I?" he asked in a rush as he came to stand with the other cats. Small curls of black fog caressed his paws and stretched down to brush the face of the pool.

"It seems you have just barely made it, Mudstar," Lilybloom replied as she stood beside the water. Stormsurge growled from his spot beside the bank, his eyes narrowed as he watched Mudstar.

"How do we know this omen didn't come from the Place of No Stars? I don't see why Mudstar needs to be here," Stormsurge hissed. A few of the other cats huffed in agreement.

Spottedrose pushed through the crowd to Mudstar's side. She raised her tail for silence as she looked at the brown tabby with kind, gentle eyes.

"We can not judge the Dark Forest warriors for their mistakes," she meowed with a glance towards Stormsurge, "Some of them were only following their way of life. They still care for our Clanmates that live in the snow covered territories," she meowed loudly in the hopes that they could all hear her over the brewing storm.

Mudstar bowed his head, "thank you, Spottedrose. Now that StarClan has finally assembled, I feel more at ease."

Spottedrose bent her tail to rest across his back and turned to rest her eyes upon the vision once more. The other StarClan cats had grown quiet, their attention fixed back on the luminous water.

The white storm that surrounded the figures had started to fade. A few of the older StarClan ancients bent together to interpret its meaning. As the white barrier faded, the shadows at the banks of the pond began to surge towards the hazy figures that had been hidden behind it.

The curled shadows flicked forward to touch the frightened figures in the center of the water. One by one, the cat-like blurs distorted and changed forms. Some of them turned to lash out at the figures beside them.

"This looks bad," Mudstar murmured. Spottedrose watched in horror as the figures started to dissolve. Most of the cats turned to speak with their companions closest to them, their voices tinged with dismay.

"What does this mean?"

"Will this be the end of IceClan?"

"How long do we have to warn our Clanmates?"

Lilybloom yowled as she attempted to quiet the clamor around her. "Nothing will be figured out by you all cackling like foxes! We must warn our Clanmates immediately; but warning them of this threat before we've discussed it will only make them afraid."

"What do you think this means Lilybloom?" Spottedrose asked. The she-cat shrugged, she really had no idea.

"Then maybe we should wait, and hope for a clearer sign," Quickwater decided.

"Yes, that is what we will do. If everyone else is satisfied, we shall speak again after we have gathered more information," Lilybloom announced. All of the StarClan cats bowed their heads in agreement before they turned to disappear into the star-studded forest. Mudstar nudged Spottedrose with his muzzle before he turned to leave.

"I'm sure Frostfeather and Pineheart will be alright," Mudstar murmured

"But what about Blizzardstar?" Spottedrose begged.

Mudstar chuckled, "What about Blizzardstar? He can take care of himself."

Spottedrose nodded but still wasn't entirely convinced. She mewed a small farewell as Mudstar trotted back through the black misted trees at the far end of the clearing. This first omen for the StarClan cats would not be easy to decipher, but the survival of IceClan would depend on it.

Chapter One {Edited}

The morning began with frigid temperatures, a normal occurrence for the IceClan cats. The wind echoed through the pine trees like a mournful howl. A white muzzle poked out of the safety of a large, rounded bush. The delicate, pink nose twitched as the cat took a few, quick sniffs.

Then the sleek cat leaped out of the of the bush. Her short, white fur seemed to sparkle in the light of dawn. "Why do we always have to get up so early?" a grumpy voice complained from behind the branches.

"If you went to sleep at a reasonable time, you wouldn't be so tired," Frostfeather scolded as she turned to look back at her companion. A muscular, black tom stepped out from the den, his eyes blurry with sleep.

"But Hailstorm hasn't even gotten up yet! He's the one who organizes the patrols," Pineheart growled. Frostfeather snorted with laughter and flicked her tail over his nose.

"That old badger would sleep until sunhigh if we let him! Besides, we are just getting a little hunting in before all the other patrols crowd the forest," she insisted.

The white she-cat bounded forward and let out a loud trill in delight. Pineheart huffed and padded after her. As she shot passed a hollow tree trunk, a similar white pelted cat emerged from its depths.

"Where are you two going so early?" Blizzardstar demanded. Pineheart sauntered up to stand next to Frostfeather. "She wanted to go hunting," he muttered.

The other cat stepped further from the shadows of the tree trunk and came to stand before the two warriors. His pelt was snowy white, and he looked very similar to the she-cat that stood before

him. "Maybe this morning isn't such a good time to go out. If you and Pineheart need something to do, the elders could always use some company," he meowed, his gaze stern as he looked at Frostfeather.

"But it's a perfect morning to go hunting," Frostfeather groaned, ready to defend her right to leave the camp.

"Well, it's Hailstorm's duty to organize the patrols. You'll have to wait for him to wake up and see if he assigns you to a hunting patrol," the white tom ordered.

Frostfeather glared at him, her green eyes blazed in frustration. "Come on, lets go visit with the elders," Pineheart offered, trying to avoid the inevitable argument. Frostfeather flicked her tail in irritation and reluctantly turned to follow him.

"I don't know why you always try and do stuff without telling Blizzardstar," Pineheart grunted as Frostfeather caught up to him.

"Well we can take care of ourselves, can't we? Besides, it was just going hunting. It's not like we were going to fight foxes," Frostfether hissed.

The pair quickly approached the low hanging branches of the pine tree where the elders made their den. As they ducked their heads and squeezed underneath, they came face to face with a wiry, brown she-cat.

"Oh, Wildflight! Were you just leaving?" Frostfeather asked in surprise. It looked as if the other elders just started to stir in their nests.

"I was going to go visit the dirt place," she remarked. "Did you two need something?"

Pineheart pushed forward to stand under the branches of the pine tree. "Hailstorm isn't awake yet to organize the patrols, so we decided to come and say hello," he explained tactfully.

"Well go away! It's too early to be bothering us," a gray tabby hissed from near the trunk of the tree.

"Don't you mind Nightvolt. He's always grumpy," Wildflight interjected, "I'll only be a moment and then we can have a chat."

She tottered away on uneven steps towards the dirt place. "Don't try chatting with me," Nightvolt grumbled as he curled into a tighter ball in his nest.

"You two can come sit with me," the skinny orange she-cat named Redfern meowed softly from her nest near the rear of the leafy branches. Pineheart eagerly accepted her invitation and squeezed passed Nightvolt to come and sit beside the elder.

"I don't understand why he has to be so grumpy! The elders get taken better care of than anyone else in the Clan," Frostfeather grumbled as she huddled close to Redfern's side.

"He is just too nostalgic of the times when the two Clans were at war. I know you've heard the story a million times," Redfern stated.

Oh yes, Frostfeather could remember the story well. The battle where BreezeClan and IceClan clashed. It caused numerous deaths and great misfortune for both Clans. In the battle, her mother Spottedrose was killed by the crazed Oakstar.

She knew that everyone always said that Oakstar was Spottedrose's father, which made him kin to Frostfeather and Pineheart; but she just couldn't imagine a father would kill his only kit. She couldn't even fathom the thought that Blizzardstar would ever want to hurt her, or Pineheart.

"Yeah, the forest needs a good blood bath," Nightvolt snickered sinisterly from the depths of his nest.

Redfern cast him an angry glare, "that's enough of that! If Blizzardstar hears of you trying to cause trouble he will drive you out of IceClan," she growled.

Frostfeather stiffened in shock. *Would Blizzardstar really do that*? "Let him drive me out! I don't care," Nightvolt snapped. Angrily, he shuffled onto his paws and started to leave the den.

"I don't think Blizzardstar would really drive him out," Pineheart

insisted. Redfern just snorted and watched the edge of the pine tree where Nightvolt had ducked and exited.

As if on cue, Wildflight padded back underneath the hanging branches. "I just saw Nightvolt leaving camp. What happened?" she asked as she came to sit in her nest.

"He was just ranting about battle again. I told him if Blizzardstar caught wind of his chatter, that he would banish him from the Clan," Redfern explained.

"We certainly don't need any battle, not after it's been peaceful for so long," Wildflight muttered. Frostfeather looked at the elder with concern. It seemed like even the mention of violence sapped her energy.

"Maybe you two should go. I think I saw Hailstorm organizing the patrols," Wildflight informed them.

Frostfeather purred, "Finally!"

As the white she-cat bounded from the den, Pineheart stood to follow her. Before he slid under the spiky pine needles of the den, he turned back to look at Wildflight again.

"Was Blizzardstar really as great as everyone says he was?" he inquired. Wildflight stifled a laugh, her tail tip twitched.

"Blizzardstar is still great," she purred, "he may have lost some of his energy but I think that was only from raising you two kits!"

Pineheart twirled his tail, "thanks Wildflight," he beamed as he slid under the branches of the pine tree. He trotted over to his sister, who had sat next to Hailstorm as he named the patrols for the morning.

"Awake early as usual," he muttered as Pineheart neared. Frostfeather rolled her eyes as he continued. "Weaseltail, you will lead a border patrol with Pineheart and you might as well take Lionpaw with you."

The russet furred apprentice bounded up to Pineheart, her green

eyes shined with boundless energy. Weaseltail was close behind, his brown fur still ruffled with sleep. Pineheart glanced up at the sky, to see that the sun was only barely visible between the trees.

"It's still early, I'm sure nothing too exciting will be going on," Weaseltail teased his apprentice. It didn't seem to dampen her spirits at all. As the brown tom turned to lead the way from camp, Pineheart looked towards his father's den in the cleft of the tree.

It almost seemed like he could see Blizzardstar's crystalline blue eyes stare back at him, but he couldn't be quite sure. In the back of his mind, he truly wondered if Blizzardstar really was as great a leader as he used to be.

Chapter Two {Edited}

Pineheart followed Weaseltail through the dense pine trees of IceClan's territory. Lionpaw hopped after them, her eyes still alight with happiness. Pineheart could remember when he felt like that. As a small apprentice learning the territory, there was always something to be excited about. *And always something new to explore*, he thought to himself

His father had told him that before he was born, the forest had went through a great thaw. The ice and snow of the sacred pine forest had almost completely gone, and left marshy swamps and massive mud puddles in its place.

Now, the ground was thick once more with a layer of ice under a large blanket of snow. Despite the frigid conditions, the foliage still managed to thrive. There was plenty of thick bushes and grasses for prey to live and survive. IceClan rarely had to go hungry.

As they continued on through the seemingly endless forest of trees, Weaseltail came to a halt and turned to his apprentice. "Okay, Lionpaw. I just want to remind you that when we get to the border you must control yourself. Just because there isn't another Clan of cats next to us, doesn't mean you should cross the scent markers."

Lionpaw rolled her eyes. "I was only trying to catch that rabbit," she meowed.

Weaseltail flicked his tail and looked at her sternly. "But there's other creatures that hunt beyond our territory! If a fox or a badger were to find you, I'm sure they'd think you'd be an easy meal."

Lionpaw shuddered as she imagined coming face to face with a fox or a badger. "Now don't go and frighten her," Pineheart muttered. Weaseltail didn't seem to hear him as he turned to lead the way through the forest once more. Suddenly, a loud racket erupted behind the small patrol. Leaves rustled and twigs snapped with wild abandon. Weaseltail whirled around and started to move forward to

shield Lionpaw behind him.

"Mousedung!" a cranky voice hissed from the depths of the spiky wildflower bush. Pineheart relaxed as he picked up a familiar scent that had been ignored in their surprise. He moved forward to help the entangled cat.

"Nightvolt, what are you doing out here?" Weaseltail called as Pineheart started to pull back the branches so that the tom could escape the vicious thorns. He squinted and tried to discern the dark pelted tom from the shadows under the bush. He noticed the elder's yellow eyes flash with contempt.

"I can get myself out," he growled as he tried to turn in the tight space to free himself. His gray tabby fur was riddled with thorns and sharp bits of twig. Pineheart ignored his ill tempered reply and pushed further into the bush to help. He could feel the thorns hook into his fur, stinging like claws. "I'm only here to help you," Pineheart soothed as he clenched his teeth when branches lashed his muzzle.

"I told you I don't need help," he retorted as he flicked out a paw to swipe at Pineheart. The whole bush shuddered as Nightvolt shifted and made the thorns dig further into his skin. Clumps of snow that were perched carefully on leaves thumped down to the ground around them.

Nightvolt immediately stopped his struggle and started to whimper with pain. Blood dripped from where the branches had dug into his fur. "Just stop fighting and let me help you," Pineheart grunted as he inched closer to the elder. Once he was close enough to inspect the knots, he noticed the tom was covered in scratches. All along his back, the thorns and branches were entangled with his gray and black striped fur.

"I'm going to have to bite through your fur," Pineheart murmured as he stepped even closer.

"What's going on in there?" Weaseltail asked as he stuck his nose through the bush's branches.

"You IceClan warriors are mouse brained," Nightvolt huffed as Weaseltail attempted to push his way through the outermost branches. Pineheart flicked his tail, surprised at Nightvolt's unwarranted attitude. *All I'm trying to do is help you*, he fumed.

"Last I checked, you were the one caught in a wildflower bush. I am also quite sure that you are an IceClan warrior just like us," Weaseltail grumbled.

Pineheart, meanwhile, had started to gnaw at Nightvolt's short tabby fur. After what felt like an eternity, he came undone and was free from the dreaded thorn bush. As soon as he felt the thorns disappear, he rushed forward to tear himself from the remaining branches.

Pineheart followed him. He didn't want to find himself also stuck in its spindly branches. Nightvolt stood a few paces away. He had turned his head to inspect his scuffed pelt.

"Are you alright?" Weaseltail asked as he stepped forward to sniff at his scratches. Lionpaw huddled close behind her mentor to watch from behind his tail, her eyes wide.

"I'm fine," he snapped, his yellow eyes flashed like fire. Lionpaw yelped, intimidated by the cranky elder. Weaseltail flicked his tail over her shoulders, not even remotely fooled by Nightvolt's bad temper.

"You don't have to worry about him. He's all yowls and no claws," Weaseltail assured her as he kept his gaze level with Nightvolt. Pineheart watched the exchange from a few steps away. He really thought Nightvolt needed to return to camp to have Brokensong tend to his injuries. But it looked like Weaseltail wasn't ready to leave.

"You should be more greatful to Pineheart! Without him, you could have been stuck in that bush all night," Weaseltail growled

"I don't need IceClan cats padding after me all the time! Just because I'm an elder doesn't mean I can't take care of myself," Nightvolt hissed in frustration. As he turned, Pineheart noticed that

some of the lacerations close to his paws had grown an angry red.

How did he get scratched from the bush that close to his paws, he wondered. In his distraction, Weaseltail had stepped nose to nose with Nightvolt. His tail flicked back and forth as he spoke, "but you can't take care of yourself! If you would have stayed in camp with the other elders, you wouldn't have gotten stuck in that bush!"

Pineheart kept his mouth shut as he watched the exchange. It seemed like Weaseltail was unusually furious, but he didn't know why he would be so upset with the snappy elder. Nightvolt must have just wanted to leave camp and had some bad luck?

"Weaseltail, I think Nightvolt needs to go back to camp and see Brokensong," Lionpaw piped up as she nudged his flank with her nose. The elder opened his jaws for another rude retort but instead just turned and started to head back towards camp.

Weaseltail huffed and started to pad after him. Lionpaw sped after her mentor, her orange tail raised high over her back. "I guess Blizzardstar will have to send out another border patrol later," Pineheart muttered as he trudged after them.

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Back in the safety of the camp, Nightvolt stomped over to Brokensong's den. Pineheart watched him go, but he felt mild curiousity as to what the medicine cat would think of his wounds.

They couldn't have all been from the thorn bush, he thought to himself. After Nightvolt vanished into the split rock, Pineheart glanced around the snowy clearing. He noticed Blizzardstar, who sat like a frozen statue next to his den.

"You know it's not polite to stare," a feminine voice teased from over his shoulder. He felt his fur ruffle in embarrassment as he turned to face the newcomer. It was a fluffy, orange she-cat; her eyes gleamed as she gazed at Pineheart.

"I was just looking for Frostfeather," Pineheart insisted. He tried to avoid her gaze as he looked down at his paws. Even though he had
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been a warrior for some time now, he was still somewhat shy around his adopted mother. She had always been there for him, after he and Frostfeather's mother was killed in the Great Battle.

"Well, Smallfire and I were just about to go out for a hunting patrol. If you'd like to join us, you're more than welcome," she purred. He thought about it for a moment, but after the ordeal with Weaseltail's patrol he decided he would just stay in camp. Besides, they would fare better without him.

"I'm sorry, Foxstreak. Maybe I can join you both on a patrol tomorrow," he offered. He dared to look up into her viridian eyes.

Despite her age, she still radiated energy and her pelt shined with health. She and her kit, Smallfire, would be perfectly fine on a patrol by themselves. Inwardly, Pineheart didn't really want to be around Foxsteak's only biological kit. Sure, they had grown up together. But Smallfire had always been greedy for his mother's affection. *I'm sure he wouldn't thank me for intruding in their patrol*, he thought inwardly.

Foxstreak almost looked ready to object, her eyes brimmed with disappointment. "Well, be sure to get some rest then. I'm sure Frostfeather had you awake before dawn," she meowed after several heartbeats. Before she turned to leave, she gave Pineheart a rough lick between his ears.

He watched her depart towards the camp entrance as Smallfire bounded up to join her. Jealousy burned like a hot coal in his stomach but he tried his best to ignore it. After all, he had said no.

While he was distracted, Blizzardstar had vanished back into the depths of his den. Pineheart narrowed his eyes as he tried to make out the shadowed shapes hunched inside the entrance of the hollow tree. It looked like Brokensong's brown and black spotted pelt in the darkness. *Shouldn't she be in her den*?

He fought his intense curiosity to creep forward to eavesdrop on the two cats. They had wanted to be alone for a reason. With a sigh, he turned to slink back towards the warrior's den.

A short nap wouldn't hurt anything, and when he awoke he was positive that he would find Frostfeather back in camp. As he started to make himself comfortable in the soft moss, he thought back to the events from earlier in the day.

It seemed so strange that Nightvolt had wandered into the forest by himself. It was even more strange that he seemed to have acquired angry, red scratches from even before he had gotten trapped in the bush. Maybe he's just clumsy. That could have been the third bush he had fallen in since he left camp. But he had been acting so prickly. It was quite unusual.

He let his thought wander as he started to fall into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Three {Edited}

Frostfeather had just started to drift into sleep. She had hunted all day with Hailstorm and Appleleaf, but hadn't managed to catch even a single scrap of prey. Now, she just wanted to get a good night's rest. As she felt her senses gently tug into unconscious, she could hear a faint rustle at the edge of the den. She grumbled softly and flicked her tail tip. "Do you really have to come to bed so late, Pineheart...?"

She opened her eyes and was surprised to find it was not her brother. The cozy warmth of her mossy nest had also dissapeared. She now lay in a field of soft grasses and flowers. Before her stood a calico she-cat with a star studded pelt. Her eyes sparkled with wisdom as she gazed down at Frostfeather.

"My sweet daughter, it is an honor to finally be able to come face to face with you," the calico purred. Her voice was soft and silky, like the freshest honey. Frostfeather stretched her eyes wide. She could hardly believe this could be possible.

"She seems a little shocked," a different female voice meowed from further into the tall grasses. Another she-cat stepped forward to confront Frostfeather, her fur dappled with orange and brown splotches.

Frostfeather opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out, she wasn't sure if this was real or just a really cruel dream. "Are you... are you Spottedrose?" she stammered, her heart hammered in her chest. She already knew the answer, it was quite easy to discern that this beautiful cat was her mother.

"Yes, my sweet kit. I have come to bring you a message, the first omen from our ancestors," she meowed seriously.

The other she-cat nodded, her voice grave as she continued, "troubling times are coming for all of IceClan."

The warmth that Frostfeather had felt as she first saw her mother had quickly faded to be replaced with dread. There was a dozen questions she wanted to ask, but all she could muster was three, short words. "But why me?"

Spottedrose leaned forward to push her nose in to Frostfeather's delicate shoulder fur. She felt her pelt tingle at her mother's touch, but the dread still clung hard to her limbs. "Your hard headed temperament may be the only hope for our Clanmates," the brown and orange she-cat mewed.

Spottedrose took a pawstep back and touched her tail to her companion's flank. "Not just her stubbornness, Lilybloom. I know you have felt the tug in your paws, to travel beyond the borders of our territory. In order for IceClan to survive, you must convince our Clanmates to leave the forest."

Leave the forest? Why would we need to leave the forest, Frostfeather thought in a panic. "But things have been so calm and peaceful in the forest," she began to object. But Spottedrose lifted her tail for silence.

"Yes there has been immeasurable peace for the forest and the animals that inhabit it. But nature is mighty and powerful. Its roots have run dry from the blood of our kin, and now it had begun to thirst." Such chilling words, but vague enough that Frostfeather wondered what they really meant.

While her mother spoke, Frostfeather saw a vivid vision flash before her eyes. She sat in the snow covered pine forest once more. The bushes rustled with prey all around her.

The longer she sat, unusual shadowed shapes flitted from the bushes to rush towards her. She could see flashes of red, bloodshot eyes; flecks of spit and foam spattered her legs as the figures nipped at her paws. She tried to pull away, to break away from the tiny creatures that bit and gnawed at her fur.

"It is not longer safe to stay," Spottedrose's voice echoed in her ears. It helped her snap out of the spooky vision. She quickly looked down at her paws, but there were no bite marks or drops of blood

in sight.

"What were those things?" Frostfeather gasped as her fur started to bush up all along her spine. She just couldn't understand why this would happen, why they needed to tell this to her and not to someone important like Blizzardstar. What could she even begin to do to convince her Clanmates?

"Herbs and prey will no longer be enough to keep you alive... trust nothing!" Lilybloom urged. Frostfeather noticed that the bodies of the two she-cats had started to fade.

With a tiny wail, she rushed forward to confront Spottedrose. "Don't leave me!" she whimpered. Her eyes stared helplessly at her mother's translucent form.

"I will never leave you, my dear," she purred as her dream abruptly ended. She blinked open her eyes to find herself back in the warrior's den. Pineheart still slept peacefully at her side, his black pelt silky and smooth. She tried to calm the frantic beating of her heart.

There's no way that I just had an actual vision from StarClan, Frostfeather thought wildly. Her mind still whirled with confusion, her white fur spiked and her skin clammy. *But that cat just had to be our mother, there's no other way*. She was just as Blizzardstar had described her, just as everyone described her.

Fresh anxiety started to rush over her pelt. Her dream would have been much more enjoyable without the stress of an omen. An omen so vague, it made her head hurt to think about. But this much was clear, that IceClan must leave the forest. The idea made her feel suffocated, her lungs struggled for breath. Frostfeather managed to escape the den on silent paws. She looked up at the sky and discerned that it must be nearly dawn. Faint rays of light peeked from across the horizon to shine upon the surface of the snow-laden forest.

Now that she had left the confines of the warrior's den, she tried to let the chill air soothe her nerves. To her surprise, she saw a flash of white out of the corner of her eye. She turned and noticed that it

was Blizzardstar. He must have just walked from the entrance of his den.

Maybe I should tell him about my dream, she thought hopefully. As she started to head towards him to go and speak with him, she watched in dismay as he turned and bounded towards Brokensong's den. She hesitated for a moment, not sure if she wanted to bother him if he wanted to speak in private with the medicine cat. *I'm sure he wouldn't be too happy to listen to my mousebrained ramblings*, she thought.

Just then, a faint noise caught her attention. It sounded like a cat in distress, but the voice was quiet and muffled. Frostfeather ran towards the darkness of Brokensong's den. She braced herself as she squeezed through the entrance, not exactly sure what she would find.

Blizzardstar whirled around as she appeared, his eyes wide. "Frostfeather! What are you doing here?" he demanded. Brokensong was bent over one of the nearby nests, but her attention on her patient had not faltered with the sudden commotion.

Frostfeather peered around her father's shoulder and caught sight of Nightvolt's gray tabby pelt stretched across a bed of moss. His flank steadily rose and fell with the calm rhythm of sleep, but his breaths were punctuated with sharp yelps of pain. The air was punctuated with the scent of infection.

"What happened to Nightvolt?" she gasped as she pushed passed Blizzardstar to get closer to the elder. Brokensong held up her tail in the attempt to keep Frostfeather away from the edges of Nightvolt's nest.

"You still haven't told me what you're doing here," Blizzardstar ordered, his eyes narrowed as he came to block Frostfeather's advances. She shuffled her paws and tried to claw together a believable excuse. Either way, he was bound to be angry at her.

"I just had a bad dream... I think I might just have had some bad prey. I wanted to see if I could get anything from Brokensong," she claimed. She hoped that he would believe her. *That's not entirely a*

lie, she tried to convince herself.

"It's best you stay back," Brokensong murmured, "Nightvolt has developed a fever rather quickly and I'm not quite sure what has caused it."

Frostfeather's heart pricked with sympathy for the elder. It was always hard for the oldest and youngest of the Clan to get sick, they didn't always recover. "Yes, maybe it would be best for you to return to your den," Blizzardstar insisted as he started to shoulder Frostfeather away from Nightvolt's nest.

Deep down, she knew she had to obey Blizzardstar. Despite that he was being overly protective, she knew that he would be upset if she caught some kind of sickness being reckless. Before she allowed herself to be herded from the den, she turned to take one last look at the elder's slumped form. But something she saw was enough to make her fur feel as cold as ice.

Are those... bite marks? All over Nightvolt's paws and legs, there were angry red bite marks covered in puss. She flashed back to her vision and thought of the horrible burning sensation she had felt as the shadowy creatures gnawed on her pelt. She stumbled as Blizzardstar once more tried to urge her towards the den entrance. "You can check on Nightvolt after his fever has come down," he grunted in frustration.

She let Blizzardstar escort her from the den. She could feel dread swamp over her once more. "Just wait, one second please," she pleaded as he started to pad away, back towards his den.

As he turned around to look at her, she saw urgency flash in his blue eyes. "What is it? Is something wrong?" he asked, his protective demeanor instantly overtook him. Should I really tell him about the dream? He's already so high strung as it is...

"I... I just wanted to ask... who is Lilybloom?" she asked. To her relief, he seemed to relax slightly at her simple question.

"Oh, were the elders telling you about her? Back when BreezeClan were still living in the forest, Lilybloom was their medicine cat. She

was actually Spottedrose's mother, meaning that she is your kin," he explained.

"Oh, I never knew that..." Frostfeather muttered. All she was ever told was that Oakstar was Spottedrose's father. She had never stopped to think who her mother might have been. But, despite her ignorance, her kin still watched over her from StarClan.

"Now that I've answered your question, can you listen to me just this once and return to your nest? You look as if you haven't gotten a wink of sleep," he demanded, concern thick in his voice.

She dipped her head and meowed softly, "yes, Blizzardstar." Before she turned to leave, he padded back to her side and brushed his muzzle along her cheek. A weak purr vibrated in his chest.

"You know I just want what's best for you," he murmured, his voice cracked with emotion. Frostfeather felt herself lean into his soft fur, their white pelts merged together like a blanket of snow.

"I know," she whispered. After a few more uninterrupted moments, Blizzardstar stepped away and returned to the darkness of his den. Frostfeather stared after him and wished she could confide in him about her dream. But she wasn't sure what it would do to him, with the anxiety he already had.

"Maybe it really was just a dream," she muttered as she padded back to the warrior's den. By now, the sun had begun to rise and the other cats had got up for the day's patrols.

"Are you only just now going to sleep?" Hailstorm snorted as he appeared from under the branches of the den.

"I had a bellyache... Blizzardstar told me to return to my nest," she replied. She didn't want him to scrutinize her, especially now that her mind was weighted with the burden of this strange dream.

"Well, I hope you feel better soon," he remarked before he turned to go and organize the daily patrols. She was relieved that he didn't question her further. Before anyone else could stop her, she slid back into the stuffy den.

"Where have you been?" Pineheart asked cheekily. *Of course he hasn't left his nest yet*, she thought to herself.

"Don't worry about it," she retorted as she started to curl up in her nest. She didn't need to justify herself to him, or any other cat. All she wanted to do was close her eyes and forget all about this stressful dream.

She heard Pineheart snort, "whatever."

She tried to ignore him as he blatantly made as much noise as he could getting out of his nest. "I guess I'll just go and catch all the prey in the forest while you're sleeping," he puffed before he ducked under the den entrance and vanished into the camp. She wanted to yowl after him, but remained silent.

The prey... the prey is no longer safe; she could hear a faint voice in the back of her mind. She wanted to hold on to those words for as long as she could. But she was utterly exhausted, and as fast as she had closed her eyes, she fell into a deep, undisturbed sleep.

Chapter Four {Edited}

Frostfeather had been startled awake, her senses alert. It had been several days since her strange dream, and she still tried her best not to forget. Deep down, she was positive that she wasn't meant to forget. She narrowed her eyes as she gazed around the pitch black den. It must still be dark, the sky would be shrouded and studded with stars if she could see through the thick branches of the den. Then she heard what had woken her.

That sounds like Nightvolt, she thought as a low wail drifted to her ears. The noise didn't seem to have woke any of the other warriors, they were all still fast asleep. With a short sigh, she got to her paws and picked her way out of the den. The air was crisp with cold against her muzzle as she made her way across the camp clearing. With every step, Nightvolt's wails became louder.

Frostfeather poked her white snout into the den, wary of what she may find. "Brokensong, is everything alright?" her tone shook with a frightful tremor. *It sounds as though Nightvolt is in a lot of pain*, she thought. The medicine cat did not answer right away. After a few moments of silence, Brokensong leaped out of the crevice in the rock and came to stand beside Frostfeather. Her fur was ruffled and covered in shreds of herbs.

"You shouldn't be here," Brokensong stated abruptly, her tone harsh. Frostfeather flinched at her words, her eyes growing wide. *Why shouldn't I be here*? A frosty chill swept up her spine, her anxieties flared anew.

"I just wanted to come see what was wrong with Nightvolt..." she explained. It felt like she had been scolded like a troublesome kit.

"Nightvolt is very sick," Brokensong rasped as she shook her head, "you mustn't get close to him. No one should." Frostfeather felt completely baffled at what Brokensong had said. *Surely Nightvolt hadn't caught greencough*?

Suddenly, the elder's distressed wails had changed to an angry growl. The fur all along Frostfeather's back started to stand on end. She glanced at Brokensong and saw that her face was frozen with horror. "What's happening?" Frostfeather asked. She didn't take her eyes off of the one-eyed she-cat.

Without any indication, a dark shape exploded from the mouth of the medicine den. Claws and teeth flashed in the moonlight as the attacker fell upon Brokensong. Its eyes were wild and filled with hate, it seemed like the entire forest was filled with the intense sound of slaughter.

"No! Someone help!" Frostfeather yowled as she attempted to grab a hold of the dark shape on top of Brokensong. At her touch, the face of the attacker turned to look at her. She was shocked to find herself stare into unfocused, crazed yellow eyes. It was Nightvolt.

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Frostfeather jolted awake for the second time. Her fur was hot and sweaty and it stuck to her skin like a layer of cobweb. Her breaths came in rapid gulps, her heart slammed in her chest. *Did that really just happen*?

It was still the dead of night as she exited the den for what felt like the second time. But there wasn't even a whisper to disturb the silence. Nothing moved at the mouth of Brokensong's den. Frostfeather felt foolish, to allow herself to become so frightened from a bad dream. *You're not a kit anymore*, she reminded herself.

Even though she knew that the camp was safe, she was aware that she would not be able to go back to sleep. Her nerves still shook like a leaf trapped in a storm. She wrapped her tail close to her side and sat down in the sparse grass outside the warrior's den. The light cover of snow melted at her touch and made the tips of her paws and tail damp.

With a deep breath, she stared up at the clear night sky. The stars danced with a magnificent light. It helped make her feel just a bit more relaxed after her dreadful dream encounter. She hadn't sat there for long before she eventually did hear something move inside
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the medicine den. She sat alert and glared hard at the entrance. She hoped she could make something out in the night's darkness. To her relief, it was just Brokensong.

As the brown and black she-cat gracefully leaped out of the entrance, Frostfeather trotted over to greet her. "Hey Brokensong! I thought I would have been the only one awake at this time of night," she purred. As Frostfeather looked closer at the medicine cat's features, she noticed that her face was creased with worry. This made Frostfeather's stomach clench with foreboding.

"Yes, it is rather late. I just had a bad dream and was hoping to get some air," she mumbled. Frostfeather noticed her ruffled fur and the twitch of her tail at every small sound from out in the forest. Brokensong didn't scare easily, whatever must have startled her must have been serious. *I'm sure my worries are nothing compared to hers*, she told herself.

But now Brokensong had turned her attention to Frostfeather. She tilted her head slightly and her nostrils flared as she took a sharp intake of breath. "What brings you out so late?" she inquired. Inwardly, Frostfeather wondered just how much she should explain to her. After all, it had been a rather troubling dream. And it had involved Brokensong, as she was slaughtered by Nightvolt.

"I also had a bad dream," she replied. *But it did really feel like it was actually happening, like it wasn't a dream*, she recalled. The stench of blood still lingered in her nose. Her heart skipped with terror as a flash of psychotic yellow eyes filled her mind.

"What kind of bad dream?" Brokensong insisted. Frostfeather was surprised to find her voice tinged with curiosity. Maybe I should tell her about the dream.

"Well... it started out that I heard Nightvolt in your den. He sounded very distressed and in pain, so I came out to come and check things out," she began, "as I got closer, you came out to meet me. You told me that I shouldn't be there, and that I mustn't get close to him."

Brokensong had grown very still while Frostfeather retold the events of her dream. Her eyes were wide and serious as she

continued. "All of a sudden, I could hear growling and then Nightvolt attacked you!" She could feel her heart start to race faster as she got to the worst part of her nightmare. She could remember so vividly, the flash of his claws as he tore at Brokensong. The harsh yellow venom of his eyes filled her vision as he whirled around to gaze into her stunned face.

"I think we need to consult Blizzardstar," Brokensong stated simply, her voice low. Frostfeather held back a gasp. Blizzardstar didn't have time to soothe her from her nightmares. She was a warrior, and that meant that she shouldn't run to her father every time she was frightened.

"What? Why would we need to tell him about some nightmare I had?" she asked, baffled. Brokensong had a very distressed look on her face, her eyes darted around the clearing as she turned to pad to Blizzardstar's den. *She's hiding something from me*, she deduced after a few moments of icy silence.

"We should tell him because I had almost the exact same dream. The only difference is that instead of me being attacked, I saw my old mentor, Tinypool. She told me that I needed to escape, and that we couldn't be here. That was right before Nightvolt ripped her throat out..." her voice cracked on the last couple of words. Her eyes reflected immense pain and sadness. Frostfeather knew that Brokensong still cared for her old, dead mentor. *So that's why she's acting so spooked*, Frostfeather reflected.

"What do you think that means?" Frostfeather wondered as she started to follow Brokensong to her father's den. The night was still enveloped in a eerie calm. Crickets chirped from their perches in the foliage that surrounded the camp.

"I'm not sure," she whispered, "but I do know that whatever will happen, it will be at the paws of Nightvolt."

Frostfeather shuffled her paws. She wondered how it was possible for an elder to cause any kind of harm. All her life, Nightvolt never seemed to cause trouble. She had heard stories about when he was a BreezeClan cat, but that was many moons ago. *Nightvolt is an IceClan cat now*, she thought, *surely he wouldn't want to hurt us?*

Brokensong stood at the tall hole in the rotten, toppled tree trunk that Blizzardstar called his den. With a soft meow, she padded through the entrance and vanished from sight. Frostfeather hesitated before she also padded inside, not sure of what she would say to Blizzardstar about her dream. *This is just all so strange*.

"Welcome, Frostfeather," he purred as she came to sit beside Brokensong in front of him. "Brokensong seems to think that you two may have shared a prophesied dream," he remarked. His eyes were gentle, perhaps hoping to ease her visible anxiety.

She opened her mouth to reply, but only nodded her head. It felt awkward to talk to him about this strange matter. "Yes, we both had a dream that Nightvolt turned savage and attacked," Brokensong cut in. She must have realized that Frostfeather was reluctant to speak in the stern presence of her father.

"Nightvolt turning savage? But the forest has been peaceful for so long. I don't think that even he would want to break the serenity," Blizzardstar grunted. He turned to Frostfeather, his blue eyes narrowed in thought. "Is this really what you saw in your dream?" he demanded. He almost sounded displeased, like they might be making it up.

"Yes," she admitted. Her voice came out like a squeak, wound tight from her increased anxiety. Blizzardstar's features softened once more. He must have noticed how much this nightmare had effected his daughter.

He turned back to Brokensong, "what do you think this dream means?"

To Frostfeather's dismay, all Brokensong did was shrug. "I can not be sure what this dream means," she meowed softly, "all I am certain of is that Nightvolt could be dangerous."

"I could never imagine that one of our elders would be dangerous. But I can't deny that your dreams were not a coincidence," Blizzardstar remarked.

Brokensong lifted up a paw and pointed to her missing eye, "I know

that all BreezeClan cats were once dangerous," she hissed. Her abrupt change of tone shocked Frostfeather. Had a BreezeClan cat been the cause of Brokensong's missing eye?

Blizzardstar gasped with shock at his medicine cat. "We are all IceClan now! I will not listen to these mousebrained ramblings about my warriors," he growled, "now, go back to your dens and get some rest. You both must have had some crowfood to have had such wild dreams."

Frostfeather's jaw dropped. Wild dreams? He had just said that hey clearly couldn't have been a coincidence! She looked desperately to Brokensong in the hopes she would object. The medicine cat's eye glittered with rage, but she didn't think it was about his comment towards their dreams.

"Those BreezeClan cats would have been better off dead in the forest," she snarled over her shoulder before she whirled around and exited the den. Frostfeather was left alone with her father. She could see that her father's whiskers quivered with rage.

"Why would Brokensong say those things about our Clanmates?" she asked, her voice thick with confusion. Blizzardstar turned away from her to face the back of his den. It felt like a wall of ice had formed between them.

"Brokensong has had a lot of misfortune at the paws of BreezeClan cats," he explained, "she lets her anger control her."

"But..." Frostfeather began to object. She had never known Brokensong to have anger. There seemed to be a lot that Frostfeather didn't know about her Clanmates. But Blizzardstar held up his tail for silence. He turned back towards her, his blue eyes dark with untold secrets that swam just beneath the surface. "Just go back to your nest. I'm positive that Nightvolt is not a threat," he soothed, his face an emotionless mask.

She knew there was no point to try and argue. StarClan would need to wait a bit longer before she could attempt to convince him to leave the forest. Frostfeather dipped her head and turned to leave. As she padded out of Blizzardstar's den and crossed the clearing, she

could hear a faint voice in the medicine den.

"But my head just won't stop hurting," the male voice complained. That's Nightvolt.

"Just take this ginger leaf and go back to sleep," that was Brokensong's soft feminine tone. Her earlier aggression had evaporated. She sounded like the same gentle medicine cat that Frostfeather had known her to be.

Everything sounds normal, she decided before she picked up her pace and pushed her way back under the warrior den's sweeping branches. She glanced at all of her Clanmates as they slept around her. The familiarity of her home helped to soothe her anxieties. *And everything will stay normal, I hope.*

Chapter Five {Edited}

A few days passed after Frostfeather's chaotic dream. She made an effort to stay away from the vicinity of Brokensong's den, afraid that at any moment Nightvolt would leap out and attack her. She knew her irrational thoughts were silly. If only she could get the image of his crazed, yellow eyes out of her head.

She had left camp early, like she did almost every morning. As usual, not a single soul stirred as she slid through the camp entrance and ran out into the pine forest that surrounded her home. The icy breeze combed through her fur and sent shivers down her spine. She ran for some time before a familiar voice called out behind her.

"Frostfeather!" She jumped and turned around, her hackles raised. Amused green eyes met her gaze as a calico approached. *What is Sweetmind doing out here*?

"You don't have to be so jumpy! It's just us," Sweetmind purred. Her tail flicked to and fro as she padded closer to Frostfeather. Her fur still smelled of the musty moss of her nest. She must have followed Frostfeather after she had left camp.

"I'm not jumpy!" she snapped. She felt foolish that she let Sweetmind frighten her so easily. "I didn't even see anyone else leave camp," she pointed out. Sweetmind's eyes flashed playfully as she neared.

"You sure seem pretty jumpy," a different she-cat teased as she came to stand beside her companion. *Appleleaf is here too*, she thought in frustration. They stood so close, their pelts touched. Spotted calico merged with cream and brown striped fur. Of course the two sisters had left together. They were nearly inseparable.

"What are you two even doing out her anyways?" Frostfeather grumbled. She had hoped to have been able to hunt in peace, but that would be impossible while they hung around. They'd rather

goof off than actually do something productive.

"We just wanted to go out on our own. Just like you do all the time," Appleleaf mewed as she shook out her cream colored fur. Sweetmind rolled her eyes at Frostfeather's ill tempered question.

Frostfeather flattened her ears, clearly irritated. "Well you aren't on your own if you're pestering me," she hissed. She whirled around and bounded away over the needle strewn snow. *How annoying can they be*, she grumbled.

The soft patter of pawsteps from behind told her that she was being followed. "Just leave me alone!" she growled. With a glance over her shoulder, she glimpsed a calico pelt. Sweetmind's scent still lingered in the air.

Why won't she leave me alone, she fumed. Now she had had enough! Frostfeather turned and reared back on her hind paws, ready to swipe at Sweetmind's muzzle. But she was surprised to find this was not Sweetmind. She had such lush, leafy green eyes; these were the color of sky, bright and blue down to their very depths.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" she asked, her voice soft. Starlight shimmered across her calico patches, quite like the strands of Silverpelt in the darkest night.

"I'm tired of surprises today!" Frostfeather snapped. Disappointment washed across Spottedrose's face. Frostfeather knew it wasn't the StarClan cat's fault, but her nerves were still frayed from her tedious omens.

"Well it's not every day that I get a chance to see you," Spottedrose countered. Inside, Frostfeather was happy to see her. But her absence from her life thus far made it hard to be appreciative of her presence.

I never thought Spottedrose would be able to walk with me outside of my dreams, Frostfeather thought, *I should be happy to see her.*

"Are you going to try and convince me that we should leave the forest? You should just tell Blizzardstar or Brokensong, I'm just a

warrior," she insisted, feeling her anxiety creep back over her fur. His rejection still stung like the hottest bee sting. "He didn't want to listen to me anyways."

"No! You must convince them! Their lives depend on it," Spottedrose demanded. Her expression grew serious as she looked down on her daughter. "I know it will be hard. But time is running short. When the sun casts its shadow, your time for safety will have run out."

Frostfeather tried to gather her thoughts. So much depended on her, what could she possibly do to convince her Clan to leave the forest? With Blizzardstar in denial, it seemed impossible. She pushed these thoughts to the back of her mind. After a moment, she noticed that Spottedrose had faded into the wind.

She looked around frantically. She hoped she could have just spotted her one more time. *She's gone*, she thought wretchedly. *I didn't even get to tell her that I miss her... why must she bring me such terrible omens?*

It would be pointless to try and hunt now. Not with that strange encounter still so fresh in her memory. She made slow progress back to camp. She didn't return until shortly before sunhigh. She hadn't realized how much time had passed while she wandered the forest. Blizzardstar approached quickly as she padded through the entrance.

"I'm not here to argue. Just come with me back to my den. We need to talk," Blizzardstar huffed. He didn't allow Frostfeather any time to speak before he turned and bounded back to his den. She sighed and followed. She half expected to be scolded for her leaving camp so early. As she slid into the safety of the hollow tree behind her father, he turned to look at her seriously.

"I need you to tell me the truth," he began, "did you really share dreams with Brokensong?" She could feel her tail as it twitched behind her. This is what she was waiting for! Now she could tell him about her strange dreams...

"Yes, we had the same dream that night. But that's not the only

strange dream I've had lately," she murmured. Reluctantly, she told Blizzardstar about her first dream, with Spottedrose and Lilybloom. She carried on to explain her vision in the forest earlier that morning. They all carried the ominous warning, that the forest was no longer safe.

At the mention of her mother, Blizzardstar's expression went blank. After she retold the events of that morning, the silence lengthened between them.

"Blizzardstar?" she mewed, desperation pricked in her voice. She needed him to tell her what they should do.

"Maybe you should just take it a bit easy on patrols the next couple of days," he decided finally after a lengthy pause. "Surely you've been stressing over your warrior obligations."

Frostfeather couldn't believe her ears, that he would push her way again, like a kit with a nightmare! "But, Blizzardstar!" she gasped, her eyes wide as he started to usher her back out of the den.

"There's no need to worry," he meowed hastily as they padded back out into the camp, "if something bad were about to happen, StarClan would tell me."

I'm not so sure, she thought regretfully as she let him herd her back towards the warrior's den. *If they were going to tell you, they would have done it already*. "As your leader, I am commanding you to rest in camp for the next couple of days. I'm sure Wildflight and the other elder's would be happy for your company."

Without even a chance to respond, Blizzardstar turned and left her by herself at the entrance to the warrior's den. She stared after him as he receded back into the darkness of his den. She felt completely dumb founded. He had acted like he would finally take her seriously, only to push her away at the first mention of Spottedrose.

Oh, StarClan... why have you given me such an impossible task?

Chapter Six {Edited}

Pineheart stared out into the camp clearing from the safety of the warrior's den. He had been awoken by loud, panicked voices that drifted through the branches.

"What's happening?"

"Where'd the sun go?"

The sun? It should be in the middle of the sky by now, he thought. He had patrolled earlier in the morning but had returned to his nest for a nap upon his return. Maybe the sun was just hidden behind the branches of the pine trees? There's no way the sun could actually be gone.

He noticed as he left the den that the sky was, indeed, dark. The camp clearing was veiled in sinister shadows. All of his Clanmates had clustered together near the camp wall. They spoke urgently or glanced up through the trees to look at the black sky. He scurried over to join them, his black tail raised in curiosity.

"Everyone must calm down," Blizzardstar demanded as he pushed his way into the center of the crowd, "wherever the sun has gone, it will return!" Pineheart could detect a note of worry in his voice. Could something more serious be happening?

Pineheart searched for his sister's white pelt among the other warriors. As he lay his eyes on her, he noticed her face was overcome with horror. What's wrong with her? She looked rigid, completely frozen as her Clanmates clustered around her. He tried to catch her attention but it was hopeless.

Foxstreak suddenly pressed close to his side. He hadn't noticed her approach. "I wonder why the sun has dissapeared?" Foxstreak wondered, her voice soft in his ear. He turned to look at her and noticed that her face reflected the same terror as Frostfeather. But what could have frightened them?

"Blizzardstar doesn't seem too concerned," Pineheart commented, his voice low. Most of the other cats were still caught up in their conversations or glanced up in the hopes to see the sun reappear. But it would not show its brilliant face in the sky, not yet.

Brokensong called out from her spot near the edge of the clamor, "StarClan may just be trying to send us a message! There is no need to assume that the sun is gone forever!" StarClan. Yes, that could be it. Maybe StarClan was just sending them a message. But what sort of message warranted the disappearance of the sun?

Pineaheart noticed Blizzardstar toss his medicine cat an odd look. Was he in doubt that this may be a message from StarClan? What else could it be?

Hailstorm stepped forward to address the Clan, his black and silver fur sleek and undisturbed. "We should carry on as normal for now. The apprentices can escort the elders to their den and make sure they're comfortable. Quietstorm, you will lead a patrol to check the borders." His resolute attitude helped to calm the Clan's worries.

The white and black splotched she-cat dipped her head and turned to pick the other members of her patrol. "Foxstreak, you will lead a hunting patrol," he continued as he turned his attention to the orange tabby.

She nudged Pineheart with her shoulder. "Do you want to join my patrol?" she asked. He shook his head. He still felt exhausted, despite his early nap. He wasn't sure he would even be able to catch any prey. He was never really adept in hunting in darkness.

"Maybe next time," he replied. She didn't seem to be disappointed this time in his refusal. She could probably see the tiredness that still lingered in his eyes.

Foxstreak bounded towards the large group of warriors. She called out for anyone who may want to join her hunting patrol. Quietstorm had started to lead her patrol out of the camp entrance; Sootsplash, Meadowshine, and Appleleaf on her tail.

Blizzardstar had broken away from his warriors as he retreated

towards his den. Frostfeather and Brokensong were directly behind him. Even from here, he could scent their fear that clung to their fur. Pineheart stared after them, curious as to what was going on between them. What's so important that I can't be involved?

"Come on, Redfern! We're going to make you a nice, fluffy nest!"

Pineheart turned as he heard Lionpaw's elated voice. The russet apprentice bounced vigorously around the three elders. She didn't seem bothered in the slightest about the sun's absence. He couldn't help but purr at her resilience.

"Just don't tread on my tail," Wildflight chimed as they vanished under the low hanging branches of the elder's den. The clearing was almost deserted, except for a couple warriors who had gone to lay near the camp barrier. Pineheart turned his attention to Shimmerpaw, who sat close to Elkleap's side.

"Maybe you can take Nightvolt a mouse in the medicine den," Elkleap offered his apprentice, "I'm sure he'd be greatful for it."

The excitement had passed, the life of the Clan continued to carry on as normal. Foxstreak exited the camp and the head of her patrol, which only consisted of herself, Aspenclaw, and Smallfire. He sent out a silent prayer to StarClan that they would manage to find some fresh kill out in the shadowed pine forest.

Pineheart caught Elkleap's attention as he turned to pad away. Pineheart lifed his tail and waved him over, a friendly expression across his face. "Today's been such an odd day," he observed as Elkleap sat at his side. The black tom watched Shimmerpaw pluck a mouse from the freshkill pile and trot into the medicine cat den. "I hope whatever StarClan is trying to tell us isn't horrible," he muttered.

Elkleap was about to reply, but he was cut short when a panicked yowl erupted from the depths of the medicine den. Pineheart flinched, his eyes wide. "Shimmerpaw!" Elkleap yowled as he charged towards the den entrance.

Pineheart was right behind him, his tufty fur even more spiked than

usual. He almost crashed into Elkleap as he stopped abruptly inside the split rock. Pineheart was completely baffled at what he saw. A few paces away, Nightvolt had Shimmerpaw's throat clamped firmly in his jaws. His yellow eyes glinted with madness, his ears flat against his head. "Let her go!" Elkleap wailed, his breath rasped out in shallow gasps.

Nightvolt did not respond. A high pitched growl droned deep in his chest. His eyes flicked between Elkleap and Pineheart. After only a short moment, Brokensong slammed into the back of Pineheart's haunches, her scent thick with anxiety.

'What's happening?!" she demanded as she tried to push passed the two toms. He could see the glint of Nightvolt's unsheathed claws as he scraped them across the rock floor of the medicine den. There wasn't time to reply. Nightvolt had released his death grip on the apprentice and had leaped straight towards them!

Pineheart summoned all of his courage and jumped forward. He crashed into the elder, surprised at the strength he felt under his unkempt pelt. "You need to stop, Nightvolt!" he growled as he sunk claws into his shoulder. He tried to push him down onto the dirt covered floor, but it was anything but easy. The elder seemed to have gained some sort of unnatural strength.

Elkleap slid around the toms as they fought and rushed to Shimmerpaw's side. Brokensong was frozen at the entrance, her good eye round with disbelief. "Don't just stand there!" Pineheart gasped, "do something!" He struggled to subdue the savage elder, his energy depleted.

Nightvolt surged forward with enough wild strength to throw Pineheart off. He landed with a thud a couple of rabbit hops away. Pineheart expected to have to fend off the crazed elder, but he saw that he had turned his attention to Brokensong.

His shoulders were hunched and his tail twitched along the ground behind him. "I will kill you," he rasped, "just like I killed Stormsurge, and Webpelt, and Quickwater..." his voice sounded foreign, unlike they had ever heard before. Pineheart wondered who those cats were. Maybe some of his ancestors who had lived

during the time when IceClan and BreezeClan were in constant war.

"You don't need to kill us, Nightvolt. There's no reason to fight," Brokensong soothed. Her typical silky voice cracked with tension. The gray tabby elder cast his gaze to his paws. A soft whimper escaped his parted jaws.

"But... but I will kill you! All of you... the forest isn't safe for IceClan anymore!" he yowled. He threw himself at the medicine cat in a fit of rage. Faster than a hawk that dove from the sky, Pineheart launched himself between them. He slashed with outstretched claws and took a chunk out of Nightvolt's chest. Blood spurted from the wound, thickening to a steady, red stream. The elder collapsed as his voice bubbled in his throat.

"This isn't over," he gasped, "you will never be safe." Pineheart watched in shocked silence as he bled out on the den floor. The life faded from his eyes, never to return.

Brokensong had not moved, her sides barely twitched as she panted in panic. "He's dead," Pineheart whispered. His heart thumped frantically in his chest, the adrenaline still thick in his veins. How quickly it had all happened, and now Nightvolt was dead.

Pineheart heard Elkleap wail at Shimmerpaw's side. He looked over to see his head and shoulders hunched as he nosed her bloody fur. "You can't be dead," he whimpered, "I promised Meadowshine I'd train you to be the best warrior."

Pineheart crept to his side, emotionally battered after his frightening encounter with Nightvolt. He looked down at Shimmerpaw's dusky, gray fur. It was completely spattered with blood, almost unrecognizable. The mouse she had carried was tossed carelessly down at her side.

"I'm sorry, Elkleap," Pineheart murmured. He could feel the senior warrior as he shook beside him, soft whimpers still punctuated his sobs.

"We need to go out there and tell them what happened," Brokensong's voice called from near the den entrance. She had

come out of her trance, but her scent was still rank with terror.

"I'll carry her," Elkleap whispered as he gently picked up the apprentice by her scruff. Pineheart watched as he carried her out. His brown and black striped tail trailed on the ground behind him. Pineheart started to follow, but Brokensong held up her tail for him to wait.

"Troubling times are coming," she insisted as soon as Elkleap was out of sight. Troubling times? What is that supposed to mean?

Pineheart gaped at her, confused. "Do you know why Nightvolt would do something like this?" he questioned her. It appeared she knew more than she was letting on.

"We will not longer be safe..." she fretted. A far away look entered her eyes as she recited the words, her pelt spiked and her tail tip twitching. Pineheart took this moment to slide out of the den. He felt insanely uncomfortable with what she had just said to him.

But what she had said was true. If their Clanmates no longer feared to kill one another, how could they ever be safe?

Chapter Seven {Edited}

"Woah, is that Shimmerpaw?!" Blizzardstar shouted. Frostfeather turned her head to see who he saw. Elkleap had Shimmerpaw's scruff between his teeth as he carried her from the medicine den. Her throat was torn and her fur drenched in blood. In the minutes that she, Brokensong, and Blizzardstar had stepped away to talk, the sun had returned. It shined in the sky once more, back to normal. But things were far from normal.

Blizzardstar got to his feet in an instant and streaked over to Elkleap's side. "What happened? Where's Brokensong?" His voice was thick with disbelief and dismay.

He glanced back at the den entrance as Pinheart emerged. He dragged the limp body of Nightvolt behind him. Frostfeather noticed that her brother also carried injuries, his pelt scratched and spotted with blood. Brokensong came last. Her expression was blank, emotionless.

Frostfeather joined them, her fur spiked all along her spine. The few warriors that had stayed in camp must have smelled the tang of split blood; they started to gather in a ragged circle to see what had happened.

Lionpaw had come out of the elder's den and stared in shock at the body of her sister. *This is really bad*, Frostfeather thought as she looked at Shimmerpaw's mangled corpse. Pineheart had placed Nightvolt on the ground, the elder's wounds equally as hideous.

"What happened?" Blizzardstar asked again, his voice tinged with sadness.

Frostfeather noticed Pineheart glance at Elkleap, but the senior warrior just stared down at the lifeless body of his apprentice. She had never seen him look so haunted. Instead, Brokensong stepped forward.

"It was Nightvolt. He... he went mad!" she wailed. She paused to take a breath, her tail tip flicked once. "We heard Shimmerpaw's yowl, and when we entered he had already killed her!"

Frostfeather shuddered as her dreams surged back to the front of her mind. Nightvolt had been dangerous, but it wasn't Brokensong who he had caught in his grasp. No, it was Shimmerpaw.

"He was just as evil... just as ruthless as when he killed Webstripe, and Stormsurge, and Quickwater. I could see it, in his face," Brokensong explained, her voice strained. Never would Frostfeather had imagined that Nightvolt could have slain so many cats.

"But Nightvolt was a loyal warrior. Things have changed since the Great Battle," Blizzardstar murmured. He sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than the others. She could feel the same regret that burned in her heart. If she could have convinced him, Shimmerpaw might still be alive.

Weaseltail had padded forward to stand beside Brokensong. He looked down at her with concern, "I believe Brokensong. Before he had gotten sick, Pineheart and I found him out in the forest. He said things that make me believe he still felt like a BreezeClan warrior," he reasoned.

Frostfeather wasn't aware that the elder had been feeling such split loyalty. Maybe that would explain why he went crazy and attacked Shimmerpaw. The other Clan cats had inched come forward to sit in vigil for the two dead cats, as was tradition for all fallen Clanmates.

Brokensong caught the eyes of Frotstfeather, Pineheart, and Blizzardstar, a silent order for them to follow her into her den. The three cats padded after her as they left the others behind to start their vigil. Lionpaw's anguished wail followed them into the confines of Brokensong's den.

As soon as they were alone, Brokensong started to speak. "I don't think we can ignore these signs any longer," she asserted, "all of this is no mere coincidence." Frostfeather noticed the fresh blood that still streaked the ground. The stench made her toes curl with disgust.

Frostfeather unsheathed her claws as fresh anxiety rolled across her fur. This is it, we are finally going to decide what to do "I don't know how you think Nightvolt getting sick and going crazy isn't coincidence. Cats get sick all the time," Blizzardstar dismissed her stubbornly. *Oh great, here he goes again*, she thought in frustration.

Frostfeather could feel Pineheart as he trembled beside her, clearly still shaken from what he had seen. She pressed against him, greatful for his warmth against her chilly pelt. Despite her closeness, he still shook with barely concealed anxiety.

"No, Blizzardstar. The sun was a sign. StarClan are telling us that this forest in which we live is no longer predictable," Brokensong urged, her tone serious. The disappearance of the sun brought death and despair to IceClan.

Pineheart finally spoke up, "but it wasn't just that... right before Nightvolt died, he told me... that this wasn't over. He said we would never be safe." Frostfeather flinched as she remembered what Spottedrose had told her only a few sunrises ago.

"Well what am I supposed to do?" Blizzardstar huffed in exasperation. Frostfeather swallowed hard, this is my chance!

"I think we should leave the forest," she asserted. The other cats looked at her, trying to process what she had just said. "I think the sickness is what made Nightvolt crazy... and if it's something he caught out there, we should try and get away from it," she continued. She felt so much more sure of her suspicions than ever before.

"I think she's right," Brokensong agreed, "his condition was getting steadily worse. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to save him." Blizzardstar bowed his head, finally accepting what his medicine cat was telling him. Sweet relief overwhelmed her.

"I guess you were right," he conceded, "but you can't ask me to leave my home... this is where Spottedrose is buried. And Snowpuddle... and Darkrose. I can't just leave them behind."

"But you'd leave us behind?" Pineheart asked, his voice tense with

emotion.

He didn't reply at first. He just kept his white head bowed in concentration. "No, I couldn't... I couldn't leave you two."

Brokensong shuffled her paws, clearly uncomfortable at being caught between the father and his kits. "Maybe we could visit the Firestone. Neither of us have been there to speak with our ancestors in many moons," she offered.

Frostfeather jumped as she heard fresh voices in the clearing. The patrols must have finally returned. She wondered how long they had spent inside the den while the others kept vigil. It had felt like mere moments, but her paws ached from standing on the hard rock floor. Blizzardstar snapped out of his trance and strode to the entrance, peeking out at the returning warriors.

"Yes, we can take a visit to the Firestone tonight. For now, I will go and comfort the Clan," Blizzardstar meowed, fresh sadness pricked in his voice as he looked out at his two fallen Clanmates. The cats who returned already gathered around their bodies.

"StarClan will tell us what to do," Brokensong meowed determinedly as she followed her leader out of the den. Frostfeather was still leaning into Pineheart's side, feeling like she could just melt into the den floor. She didn't want to break away, to lose the comfort of his presence beside her.

He finally believes me, she thought with relief. She pulled back and looked into Pineheart's face, noticing that he was completely lost in his own thoughts.

"You can always talk to me about what happened," she whispered, pressing her muzzle into his cheek. She heard him take a deep breath. She hoped for a moment that he was going to open up to her. But just as she had hid things from him, he must have felt this was something he should bear alone.

"Thanks, Frostfeather," he purred weakly as he turned and leaped out of the den. She looked down at her paws, noticing that the streaks of blood had hardened into red scabs across the den floor.

"I wonder if any of our other Clanmates will fall ill before this is all over," she wondered aloud before she also turned and finally leaped out of the den to join her Clan in vigil for Shimmerpaw and Nightvolt.

Chapter Eight {Edited}

"We should leave at once," Blizzardstar insisted to his companions. Frostfeather looked over at her Clan, who had huddled around the cold bodies of Shimmerpaw and Nightvolt. It felt so wrong to be leaving them during the vigil, but their lives could depend on this small journey.

"Yes, we can leave now," Brokensong agreed, flicking her tail for Blizzardstar and Frostfeather to follow her out of the camp. It was almost dusk, nearly time for the Firestone to awaken for their nightly encounter.

Blizzardstar broke away for a moment to speak to Hailstorm before their departure. "Will they be alright while we are gone?" Frostfeather asked as he returned. Their peaceful existence had been shattered, and it would cause ripples throughout the Clan for moons to come.

"As alright as they can be. Meadowshine and Sootsplash will grieve the loss of Shimmerpaw for some time," Blizzardstar murmured as they pushed their way out through the camp entrance. She couldn't imagine how the two parents must feel, to bury their daughter. Frostfeather shook out her fur, wondering how she would feel if Pineheart or Blizzardstar were to die. She couldn't imagine what sort of future Lionpaw would face without her sister.

"Stop daydreaming! We need to be quick if we want to make it in time," Brokensong chided as she picked up the pace to a run. Blizzardstar sped after her, with Frostfeather close behind. Urgency lent speed to paws as they embarked on the path to the Firestone.

There was no time for words as they traveled, not when the sun was steadily sliding behind the massive mountain ahead of them. As they approached, the snowy grass had changed to a sleek, rocky surface. The summit was steep, almost too slippery for them to gain a claw hold.

"Over here is an easier spot." Blizzardstar indicated with his paw to a tumble of rocks a little further along the base of the mountain.

Brokensong didn't hesitate. She threw herself at the stones and started to claw her way up the side of the facade. Blizzardstar took a deep breath and leaped after her. His tail stuck straight out as he tried to keep his balance.

Frostfeather waited for a couple moments. Her thoughts started to wander. But the wind had become more intense as it whipped at her ears and whiskers. "Don't fall too far behind!" Blizzardstar yowled back at her.

She looked up and felt sick as she saw her father many foxlengths up the crumbling mountainside. With a quick gulp of fresh air, she sprang as far as she could onto the unstable rocks. She almost lost her footing, but she scrabbled at the loose pebbles until she came to stand beside Blizzardstar on a narrow ledge.

"The worst part is over," he soothed as they continued to pad carefully along the rocky outcrop. Brokensong was a good deal ahead. Her tail tip flicked with urgency as she bounced further and further along the path.

"I can't even remember the last time I was here," Blizzardstar meowed. He hoped Frostfeather could hear him over the intense gusts of the wind. "We haven't had a need to share with StarClan, until now."

Frostfeather swallowed hard. She felt some sort of foreboding tug at her paws. Until now, things had been peaceful. But now we are no longer safe, the words that Spottedrose had said rang in her ears like a lone hawk's cry.

"Hurry! I can see the cave!" Brokensong yowled as she bunched her muscles and took a flying leap towards a dark hole embedded into the mountain.

"Let's get a move on," Blizzardstar grunted as he ran and pushed off to jump into the cave. Frostfeather followed him into the cavern, relieved as the wind died down behind her. The grotto was eerily

quiet and dark.

"Come forward. We mustn't keep them waiting," Brokensong chirped as she waved Blizzardstar and Frostfeather forward. It was so hard to see, she almost bumped right into the massive opal vein that crossed the wall like a stubborn vine of ivy.

"Now, press your nose against the stone and close your eyes," Brokensong whispered as she settled down next to the stone. As Frostfeather closed her eyes, a beam of moonlight flashed into the cavern and sent the opal shimmering like a sea of flames.

She almost cried out in shock, but was immediately pulled into a deep sleep. She fought to open her tired eyes and blinked them open to find a grassy clearing. It looked to be deserted, with no indication that anyone was here waiting for them.

"We're too late!" Brokensong groaned next to Frostfeather. Her brown and black tail flicked in agitation. Blizzardstar was about to agree, when two familiar pelts started hurrying towards them from out of the tall grass.

"Is that... Nightvolt?" Blizzardstar asked in disbelief. He was clearly taken aback by the elder's presence.

"Yes! And that's Shimmerpaw!" Frostfeather meowed excitedly.

"What are you guys doing here?" Shimmerpaw asked as she skidded to a halt next to the three dreaming cats. Her pelt was no longer torn or drenched with blood. She looked almost happy, while Nightvolt shined with health.

"We came to ask StarClan for guidance," Brokensong explained, "we fear the forest is no longer safe."

"Of course it's not!" Nightvolt snorted, "a sickness is plaguing these lands. Right before the sun dissapeared, I could feel a sort of evil hold taking over me. I couldn't control myself, all I felt was an unimaginable rage."

Frostfeather flicked her tail uncomfortably, this sickness sounded very serious. If it brought its host into an uncontrollable rage,

everyone could be a threat. "All sickness can be treated with herbs," Blizzardstar pointed out matter-of-factly.

Nightvolt shook his head. "No herbs can cure this disease. It is absolutely fatal to any cat infected, and to the cats that are around them."

"What are we supposed to do then?" Blizzardstar asked hopelessly. Frostfeather watched as Shimmerpaw and Nightvolt exchanged a knowing glance.

A strange scent started to drift over the cats, carried by the breeze through the star studded trees. The silence seemed to go on for an eternity before Shimmerpaw finally spoke. "You must leave."

"Yes, it is time for IceClan to leave the forest," Nightvolt agreed, "StarClan knows what is to come. They have started their journey on to clearer skies."

Frostfeather noticed her father stricken with shock. "StarClan have left?" he asked, his voice came out in a startled squeak. That means that StarClan had left, regardless if their Clanmates were following them.

"Yes, we were just leaving to catch up with them now. Hopefully there aren't any other interruptions. They want to make sure they find a safe place for you to all live, over the mountain and to the south," Nightvolt meowed. He flicked his tail over Shimmerpaw's back and ruffled her fur.

"Thank you for this information," Brokensong mewed diplomatically as she bent to touch noses with Shimmerpaw and Nightvolt in turn. "We will leave as soon as we can. I know we will make it, with StarClan to guide us."

Frostfeather padded forward to also touch noses with her old Clanmates. Grief threatened to overwhelm her, but she knew she must be strong. "I'll tell Lionpaw that you're okay," she whispered as she brushed muzzles with Shimmerpaw.

But as she pulled back, the StarClan apprentice was gone. The

clearing was empty but filled with a horrible, deafening howl. It was so loud, it made Frostfeather's ears ring. She blinked her eyes to find herself back in the cavern of the Firestone.

She felt her pelt prickle as another howl split the silence in her waking world. "Is that wolves?" Brokensong asked warily. Her good eye flashed in the darkness.

Blizzardstar instantly stood and bounded to the mouth of the cave. He looked out over the rolling hills and valleys towards the pine forest. "It sounds like it's coming from camp," he gasped before he leaped out and down the side of the mountain.

"Oh no," Frostfeather murmured as she followed Brokensong out of the safety of the hollow. They didn't take any precautions as they embarked down the mountainside. They needed to get back to camp as quickly as possible.

Chapter Nine {Edited}

Blizzardstar propelled himself down the side of the cliff face. He wasn't sure if his paws connected to any of the rock on his path downward. But his safety wasn't really important to him, more so the safety of his Clanmates who had remained back in camp.

"Be careful!" Brokensong yowled after him, still several fox lengths behind. But there wasn't any time to be careful! He had seen something horrible after his vision with StarClan. Something evil filled with death and blood. The thought made him frantic as he hurtled himself across the grassy, snow laden field at the foot of the mountain. He still had to run through the valley, but he could almost smell the musty scent of the pine forest.

But there was another smell, absolutely putrid with the unmistakable tang of sickness and infection. Blizzardstar looked down to see the large prints of a predator trailing across the snow in the same direction he was headed. These are the tracks of a wolf, he thought as he continued to streak towards IceClan territory. He could hear Brokensong and Frostfeather as they yowled after him, but he couldn't stop. Not when his Clanmates were in danger.

The trees started to blur at his sides as he burst through the tree line. Ferns and branches whipped his muzzle, his eyes watered. As he got closer, he could finally hear a faint noise. It was a pitiful wail, coming directly from camp. He could hear his companions as they crashed through the undergrowth. It was absolutely silent as they neared their home.

Blizzardstar almost recoiled as soon as he saw what lay in wait for him in his camp. Bodies lay strewn across the clearing, tattered and lifeless. He noticed Hailstorm, hunched over the body of Quietstorm. He rushed over and tried not to focus on the lifeless eyes of his Clanmates, scattered across the scant grass. "What happened?" he croaked. Immense grief washed over him like a choking wave.

Hailstorm jumped at his voice. He whirled around, ready to lash out. "Oh, its you... I was afraid it had come back to finish the rest of us.." he explained. Blizzardstar noticed in horror that the brown and black tom's pelt was covered in cuts and bite marks. It looked like he had tried to apply cobwebs to his wounds, but they were amateur at best.

Brokensong was at his side in a flash, her one green eye wide in disbelief. "I'll start tending to the wounded," she mewed before she rushed to her den.

Blizzardstar turned his gaze from Quietstorm's mangled corpse to take in the devastation around the camp. All the dens, except for the solid rock of the medicine den, were destroyed. Only a few cats clung to the shadows at the edge of the camp.

Sweetmind was doubled over a few rabbit hops away as she sobbed over the bloody body of Appleleaf. Foxstreak limped toward Brokensong's den. One of her paws was ripped off and was bleeding profusely. Blizzardstar gagged, the overwhelming stench of blood clouding his senses. "Blizzardstar?" a weak voice called from a mass of bodies near the center of camp. He took a short breath and padded over.

It was Wildflight, barely clinging to life. She laid beside the other elders, who had still been keeping vigil next to Nightvolt. Redfern and Willowleaf were already dead, their eyes open yet unseeing.

"Wildflight..." Blizzardstar groaned, "this never should have happened." No, you were supposed to live a long and happy life with the elders, he thought emotionally. She lifted her paw in an attempt to silence his frantic gasps as he tried to breathe.

"Don't be upset," she purred. He felt his heart crack in two at her calm voice, already accepting her approaching demise. Her eyes clouded with pain as she tried to sit up. As she did so, blood started to pour out of a wound on her stomach. She had to lay down once more.

"You're talking nonsense," he wailed. He pressed his nose into her fur. He inhaled deeply in the hopes to preserve some of her scent.

But the clearing was so bathed in blood, it filled his nostrils and his open mouth.

"No, I knew IceClan could not live in peace forever," she whispered. Her whole body shuddered for a moment before she carried on speaking, "but this won't be the end. IceClan will live on..."

Blizzardstar buried his muzzle deeper into her shoulder fur. He became desperate as he felt her blood start to soak into his paw fur. "Don't go," he pleaded, his body rigid with tension as he waited for her response.

It never came.

Hesitantly, Pineheart approached his father from the edge of the clearing. "Blizzardstar..." he mumbled.

"Yes, Pineheart?" he asked, his voice flat, defeated. It almost hurt his entire being to sit here, his loved ones dead or almost dead around him. All of the cats he had grown up with, cats he had called friends. He should have been able to protect them.

"What should we do if the wolf comes back?" Pineheart's asked, his voice shaky. Hailstorm rested his tail on Blizzardstar's shoulder, which made him jump.

"He's right, Blizzardstar. We have no reason to believe the wolf won't come back to finish what it started," Hailstorm explained seriously. Wolves weren't a common occurrence in the forest. But now that they knew the IceClan cats were easy prey, nothing would stop them.

Frostfeather slid around the edge of the camp, careful not to stumble over any of her deceased Clanmates. She came to Pineheart's side and stared at the carnage that painted the camp clearing. They looked so afraid...

Blizzardstar stared at them for a long moment. His brain whirled with his emotions and the responsibility of leadership. What am I supposed to do, he thought wretchedly. On one paw, he couldn't leave his injured Clanmates for death. On the other paw, his healthy

warriors had to leave if they were to survive.

IceClan must leave the forest, an achingly familiar voice penetrated his thoughts. He almost twirled around to find the source of the voice, but contained himself. Spottedrose? How can you possibly expect me to just leave the forest? Just the mere thought of it made his stomach curl.

Don't you remember what I had told you so long ago? You will not have to. Frostfeather and Pineheart will lead IceClan to a new home. The StarClan cat's voice drifted through his mind.

"Blizzardstar?" Featherstar meowed in an attempt to get his attention. He snapped back to reality and realized that he had been staring straight at Pineheart and Frostfeather.

"I'll tell you what IceClan must do," Blizzardstar instructed. His voice shook with the weight of what he was about to say. "IceClan must leave the forest."

His uninjured Clanmates stepped forward, so few compared to the lifeless bodies that lay all around them. Aspenclaw limped on a twisted leg, his tail mangled and bloody. Sootsplash, Meadowshine, and Lionpaw stayed huddled near the camp barrier, their eyes wide. Sweetmind had moved from Appleleaf's side, to hover over Quietstorm's cold body. Smallfire must have followed Foxstreak to the medicine den, he was nowhere to be found.

So much death and grief. Can I really ask them to leave? He took a deep breath and prepared to address his Clan for the last time.

"StarClan met with us at the Firestone. They told us that the forest is no longer safe, that IceClan must leave the forest," he explained. He was met with puzzled looks from the cats that surrounded him.

Brokensong had reappeared from her den, and continued to speak after his pause. "Yes, StarClan told us that there is a sickness in these lands. One that herbs can not cure. It will drive any cat crazy and force them to attack and even kill their anyone."

"That must be what happened to Nightvolt," Pineheart realized.

"The wolf must have been infected then," Hailstorm mewed, "it was acting chaotic! Its jaws were dripping with foam and its eyes were bloodshot." Blizzardstar continued to gaze around at the battered bodies of his warriors. If he would have just listened... if he would have just heeded Brokensong's warnings.

"I could smell the infection in the air, as we were coming back," Blizzardstar agreed, "that means that anyone who was bitten or claws will also be infected." And that left very few that were fit to travel.

"That's unfortunate..." Hailstorm grunted. He raised his paw to show a ragged bite mark along his torso. "I know Aspenclaw and Foxstreak were also injured by the big brute."

"Then what are they supposed to do?" Sootsplash called, a challenge in his voice. "If they're sick, they can't come with us when we leave! It'd be pointless!"

Blizzardstar's gaze bore into the white and black splotched tom. "I will stay, and care for them," Blizzardstar explained. Some of the cats started to protest but he silenced them with a hiss.

"I have led IceClan without question for the better half of my life! StarClan had picked me, to lead us through the darkness so that we could find peace. And now, it's their turn," he meowed as he turned his attention to his kits.

"Us?" Pineheart gasped. He looked at his father like he had just sprouted wings. "But you're the leader! How are we supposed to do this without you?!"

Frostfeather wrapped her tail around Pineheart and pulled him close to her side. "You aren't kits anymore," Blizzardstar breathed, "my last duty as leader will be to make sure my infected Clanmates do not suffer at the paws to this disease."

"Those of you who are infected may come to my den. I'll patch you up before we leave," Brokensong meowed. Her voice was thick with regret but there was no way to avoid this now.

Hailstorm turned and padded after her. Elkleap let Aspenclaw lean against his shoulder as he escorted him to the medicine den. Pineheart and Frostfeather also padded over. They weren't sure exactly how they would say their goodbyes to their adopted mother, Foxstreak.

Sootsplash led Meadowshine and Lionpaw to the camp entrance. He stared at the bodies of Quietstorm and Appleleaf, his eyes dark with sorrow. His sister and her kit deserved a better death than this. After some moments, Sweetmind joined him and the others. Elkleap exited the medicine den and also bounded over to wait by the camp entrance.

Blizzardstar watched in silence as his Clan divided themselves, healthy and infected. After a lengthy goodbye, Frostfeater, Pineheart, Smallfire, and Brokensong all left the confines of the medicine den.

Foxstreak hovered at the entrance to watch them leave. Blizzardstar knew how much it would pain her to see them go; the kits she had fostered after her best friend's death, and her own biological offspring. But they would find a new home, where IceClan could survive.

"We should leave immediately," Brokensong interjected. Blizzardstar was still next to Wildflight, who had since grown cold and stiff at his side. He knew she was right but it didn't make their departure any easier.

"Yes, the longer you wait, the more danger you are all in," he agreed. He stepped towards the pitifully small group of cats and rested his muzzle on Frostfeather's shoulder. He could feel her tremble with his touch.

"Take good care of IceClan. They will need a strong warrior to guide them," he whispered. He saw her eyes glitter with sorrow as she pressed her nose into his cheek fur. He inhaled her scent, so warm and familiar. It was hard to imagine he would never see his kits again.

"I will never forget you," she breathed. The words pierced his heart

like a thorn.

"Neither will I," Pineheart whimpered, "we couldn't have had a better father."

A purr rumbled in his chest at their kind words. After a few seconds, Blizzardstar sat back on his haunches to look at his Clanmates for one last time. "We won't ever forget you," they all murmured in unison.

"Don't forget about me either," Hailstorm called in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Oh, don't worry. None of you will be forgotten," Brokensong assured, "hopefully we will all meet again one day." Yes, they would all meet again, but after they have lived their lives and make their journey to StarClan.

Blizzardstar spoke his final farewells and watched as the tiny patrol finally padded out of the entrance. After a moment, they disappeared from sight. He took a shaky breath and wondered what he was supposed to do now. Did I just make the biggest mistake of my life?

"Blizzardstar!" Foxstreak wailed from inside the medicine den, "my paw hurts like fire!"

"I'm coming!" he replied as he stood and padded back towards the split rock. They still need me, he reminded himself.

"Should I start carrying their bodies out for burial?" Hailstorm asked before Blizzardstar could escape into the den.

"No, we can sit vigil for them tonight. We will worry about burying them in the morning," he murmured.

Inside the medicine den, Foxstreak waited patiently for Blizzardstar's arrival. He winced as he noticed her paw, or where her paw was supposed to be. Brokensong had wound it tight with cobweb, and it was covered in a herb paste.

"I'm sorry this had to happen," he meowed as he came to sit next to

the nest that she had claimed.

"Oh, I'm not," Foxstreak murmured, "I'm glad that they left. Atleast, far away from here, they can find somewhere safe."

Blizzardstar bowed his head. "You're right," he conceded, "they will finally be safe."

Chapter Ten {Edited}

The group padded on in silence. They were headed towards the mountain that housed the Firestone. Pineheart had overheard Brokensong say that they must pass over the peak and head south. But which direction is south?

"Ouch!" Lionpaw exclaimed from her place near the middle of the patrol.

"Hush.. we mustn't draw the attention of predators," Meadowshine whispered in her ear. Pineheart desperately hoped that the wolves would not return. With the wounded so vulnerable back at camp, they would surely all perish. The thought of Blizzardstar losing every single one of his lives at the jaws of a wolf sent shivers down his spine.

"We're coming to the first valley!" Brokensong called over her shoulder. Her tone was still subtle, as to not attract any curious eyes. It seemed everyone was on edge. Nothing felt safe anymore...

"What was that?" Smallfire gasped a few paces in front of Pineheart. He had come to a halt while he flicked his tail to and fro. Pineheart almost ran straight into his rump.

"Keep going you daft squirrel," Pineheart grumbled as he pushed him forward with an ignorant shove. Smallfire shot him a reproachful glance but scurried onward.

I'm not about to make him think he's the only one upset! Foxstreak was my mother too, he thought in frustration. The tom has been almost hysterical while they said their last goodbyes. He wailed that he could not leave her behind.

Yet, here we are, Pineheart reminded himself. His heart burned with guilt and regret. We left all of them behind.

He knew that Foxstreak wasn't his real mother, but she had raised

them like her own. It was difficult to imagine that he would never see her, nor Blizzardstar, again.

The patrol padded out of the cover of the pine trees. A massive hill loomed before them. "We will travel over this rise and through the valley," Brokensong instructed as she trotted along at the head of the group.

Frostfeather was at her side, her shoulders slumped. Pineheart wanted to comfort her, but his heart still stung that she had not confided in him about her dreams.

She had decided to tell him shortly after they left. She had hoped to share her anxieties with him. But he had pushed her away. If she would have come to me sooner, we could have figured out a way to save everyone! Now they're all as good as dead.

As they continued to journey down the valley and up the next hill, Pineheart's fur turned cold. Behind the cats, furious barks and howls echoed through the closely packed trunks of the pine forest.

"The wolves!" Pineheart wailed as he whirled around, "the wolves went back! We have to go help!"

He dug his paws hard into the dirt, ready to push off and charge back towards IceClan. But a heavy weight knocked him over. He looked up into the eyes of Elkleap.

"You can't go back!" he shouted.

"Let me go!" Pineheart rasped as he raked his claws through the short grass. Brokensong was beside them in a moment, her expression grave.

"We can not save them," she murmured. She looked deep into Pineheart's eyes and hoped that he would understand. "I need you to accept that."

"But, Blizzardstar!" His struggle became frantic. Elkleap just pushed him down even harder into the ground.

"Blizzardstar knew what he was doing when he decided to stay,"

Frostfeather pointed out as she came to stand beside Brokensong, "he would want us to keep going, so that we can carry on IceClan's legacy."

Pineheart stopped as she spoke. His eyes were round with disbelief and more importantly, hate. "How can you say that!" he hissed.

"We can't stay here," Sootsplash called from further ahead. He stood in front of Meadowshine and Lionpaw, his claws unsheathed. Sweetmind stood only a few paces away. She looked stricken with horror as the barks and howls continued in the forest behind them. "If those wolves find our trail, they'll catch up to us in no time!"

Pineheart looked up at Frostfeather. He felt hot anger bubble in his stomach. How can she be so heartless?

Reluctantly, Pineheart allowed himself to be lifted off of the ground. Elkleap kept a stern eye on him, but Pineheart didn't want to delay them any longer. If the wolves caught up to them, Blizzardstar would have died for nothing.

Smallfire kept up with his steady pace, which only made his anger deepen. "Do you think they're alright back there?" Smallfire whispered.

"It's best you two don't think about it," Elkleap commented. Pineheart flattened his ears, greatful for the silence that followed. Finally, they approached the massive slope of the mountain. The sun shone behind its mighty peak.

Near the base, there were some scraggly bushes and a few trees. "We should rest here until morning," Brokensong directed. Sootsplash immediately pulled Meadowshine and Lionpaw aside to build them nests underneath a small bush. Sweetmind hovered at their side, clearly unsure of what to do.

"If you'd like, you can join me to go and find some prey," Elkleap offered as he turned to Pineheart. He stubbornly shook his head. He didn't really want to do much of anything but curl up and go to sleep.

Smallfire sat down beside him and wrapped his tail around his paws. After a moment, Elkleap grunted and turned. Pineheart watched as he disappeared along the edge of the mountain, his ears alert for the sound of prey.

"You can blame me for all of this, if it helps," Frostfeather's gentle voice sounded in his ear. He turned to look at her as he felt his anger flare anew.

"I will blame you! All of this could have been avoided!" he hissed. Frostfeather's eyes flashed with hurt, her ears flattened against her head.

"I wish that was true," she mumbled.

Brokensong had started to build nests for the others underneath an adjacent bush. Perhaps the busywork helped to keep her mind off of the grim situation they were all in.

"I wish he could have just come with us," Frostfeather mewed, "but he had his reasons to stay."

Like what? We need him more than the infected cats do!

"He believed in us. He knew we could do this without him," she mewed.

Pineheart sighed, his frustration fading. He knew that she was right. Blizzardstar would not have stayed behind if he knew that they could not survive this journey without him.

"I guess you're right," he agreed. But his chest felt heavy with sadness. I just wish I could close my eyes and this would all be over.

Pineheart felt her lean into him, her fur unusually cool. Her fur trembled; and when he looked into her eyes, he could see the exact same grief that threatened to overwhelm him.

Smallfire had curled up and fallen asleep right beside them. His orange and white fur was ruffled with exhaustion. Eventually, Elkleap returned with two squirrels for everyone to share. Pineheart jabbed a paw into Smallfire's side to wake him up. He would have

to eat before he fell asleep.

Sootsplash helped Elkleap divide up the meat so that everyone had a fair share. As they ate, they all started to share stories of their lives back in the IceClan camp.

"I can remember, back when I was an apprentice. Stormsurge and Weaseltail taunted me to climb a tree! They used to always like to pick on me," Brokensong purred.

"And I remember back when you were still an apprentice," Sootplash meowed as he turned to look at Sweetmind. "You and Appleleaf were always trying to get into trouble. Quietstorm had her paws full with you both."

The calico she-cat's eyes glittered with sadness at the mention of her mother and sister. She stayed silent as the others continued with their own stories.

"Back when we were still kits, I remember Foxstreak scolding you both for bothering the elders," Smallfire meowed, his voice still bleary with sleep. "She was always trying to keep you both in the nursery."

"I think she just didn't want anything to happen to us," Frostfeather commented, "I'm sure it would look bad if she let the leader's kits get hurt or lost."

The sky was now dark. The stars shined up above the small band of cats as they finished their meals. "We will leave at the first sight of dawn," Brokensong mewed as she stood to go and pad to her nest. "Make sure to get as much rest as you can."

The other warriors also went to their nests. They were clearly ready to go to sleep. Smallfire, Pineheart, and Frostfeather all took nests next to each other under a leafy berry bush near the base of the mountain. Brokensong was also there, but it didn't take long before she fell into a deep sleep.

"Tomorrow is a new day," Frostfeather mumured as she curled up in her cozy nest, "we will figure out where we should be headed in the

morning."

Pineheart also curled into his bed of moss, ready to finally rest after such a long day. Don't worry Blizzardstar, Pineheart thought as he started to drift into unconsciousness. We won't disappoint you.

Chapter Eleven {Edited}

"Frostkit, be careful!" a soft voice called from somewhere behind. Frostkit turned to look into the wondrous green eyes of Foxstreak.

"I'm being careful," she puffed. She lifted her paw to take another playful swipe at Pinekit. He growled and wiggled his haunches, crouched low. With a quick leap, he threw himself on top of Frostkit.

"Ugh! You're too heavy!" she squeaked as she pushed her brother off of her. He flattened his ears and bared his teeth to show her his tiny, kit fangs.

"Maybe I wanted to squish you!" he teased, his black fur spiked all over the place. As soon as he lowered down to take another leap, Blizzardstar padded into camp at the head of a patrol. Frostkit waited as he strode over to them, his head held high.

"Blizzardstar!" Frostkit and Pinekit squealed in unison as they ran towards their father. Foxstreak got up from her shaded resting spot and also started to slowly plod after them.

"They've been rather rambunctious today," Foxstreak commented as she sat down at Blizzardstar's side. Frostkit and Pinekit had thrown themselves onto his flank. They used their hind legs to propel themselves onto his back.

"Didn't Smallkit want to play with them?" Blizzardstar asked. He looked towards the nursery entrance in the hopes to see the tiny, orange and white kit.

"You know he'd rather just play by himself. Frostkit and Pinekit get too rough sometimes," Foxstreak reminded him. She lifted a paw to gently pat the kittens off of their father's spine.

"Come on you two. Blizzardstar has more important things to do than to play," she chided. Frostkit reluctantly slid down his flank,

with Pinekit on her tail..

"But playing is important!" Pinekit puffed, a serious expression on his face. Blizzardstar purred and bent over to touch his nose to Pinekit's forehead.

"You're right, playing is important. So maybe you two should go try and play gently with Smallkit?" he offered, his voice soft with love for his offspring.

"Maybe we can play moss ball," Frostkit squealed, "Smallkit likes that game!"

"That sounds brilliant Frostkit," Foxstreak purred while she curled her tail around to brush the she-kit's fuzzy, white fur.

"Yes, that is a good idea. You should both go and find him so that Foxstreak and I can have a private talk," Blizzardstar instructed.

"About what?" Pinekit inquired as he stretched out a paw to tap at Blizzardstar's tail tip.

"Just a rogue scent on the border. Nothing you kits need to worry about," he assured them. His tail tip flicked to hit Pinekit in the nose.

"A rogue," Frostkit repeated, her eyes widened in awe. "What's a rogue?"

"Just a cat who lives without a Clan. Sometimes they can be trouble, but usually they just stick to themselves," Foxstreak explained.

"I feel like this one was spying on us," Blizzardstar cut in. He and Foxstreak exchanged a serious glance. "The scent was almost familiar... it reminded me of BreezeClan."

"BreezeClan..." Frostkit echoed, "I didn't know there was a BreezeClan."

"You actually lived in the BreezeClan nursery when you were just a few days old," Foxstreak told her, "that was back when your mother

was still alive."

Frostkit shook out her fur. It still felt uncomfortable to talk about her mother. She couldn't even remember her, but sadness overwhelmed her heart whenever she was mentioned. She wished she could have known her.

"You remind me so much of her," Blizzardstar murmured as he gazed at Frostkit. She shuffled her paws as sorrow thickened in her chest. "Maybe one day she'll watch you lead IceClan from Silverpelt."

"Lead IceClan?" Frostkit asked, clearly puzzled. Why would he say anything like that? Is something going to happen to Blizzardstar?

"Don't look so startled. I'm sure no cat knows for certain where your destiny will lead," Foxstreak soothed as she shot Blizzardstar a stern look. "Until then, we will be here to care for you."

Pinekit started to stomp around in a circle while his tail waved in the air above him. "My destiny is to become the best hunter in IceClan!"

Frostkit watched him as her thoughts wandered. Foxstreak pulled her closer to her side with her tail. She could vaguely feel her foster mother's tongue as it lapped over the top of her head. But I don't want to be leader, she thought fretfully.

Surprisingly, a strange sensation crept over her pelt, like narrowed eyes that watched her from the shadows. She whirled around and blinked to find herself in an unknown nest. Pineheart and Smallfire were still fast asleep next to her.

She took a deep, steady breath. She remembered that she was no longer in her beloved camp. Their journey had started and she had been forced into a destiny she did not want. As she lay there and stared at the bush, that strange sensation started to wash over her again.

"Is someone there?" she hissed. She squinted to try and make out the glint of eyes in the predawn darkness. Slowly, she stood up and

slid out of the makeshift den. There was no one in sight.

Surprisingly, after a few moments, Brokensong appeared from her resting spot. Her pelt was ruffled and unkempt, like she had tossed and turned all night.

"I've had nightmares," she whispered as she slid over to Frostfeather's side, "I feel these lands are still plagued with evil. We should leave as soon as the others wake up."

Frostfeather studied the undergrowth that surrounded them. She knew that she, too, had felt an evil presence in the area. "I'll go and wake up Pineheart and Smallfire. Atleast after we cross the mountain, we should be safe from that sickness."

Brokensong grunted, but Frostfeather wasn't sure if she agreed. She retraced her steps back to the bush so she could rouse the others. Does Brokensong think the sickness isn't the only evil lurking here?

Chapter Twelve {Edited}

Pineheart pushed Frostfeather away with a disgruntled hiss. "I'm awake!" he growled as he reached out a paw to take a swipe at her side. Musty scents of dried leaves wafted on the breeze from somewhere nearby. *Oh how I wish it was pine needles*, he thought as he slowly pushed himself to his feet.

"Brokensong wants us to leave immediately," she explained. Her ears twitched and her fur was spiked along her spine.

"Is something happening?" Pineheart asked, his eyes shadowed with worry. She shook her head and stretched out her foot to shove Smallfire awake.

"We just need to leave before we attract unwanted visitors," she muttered. She inwardly hoped that Pineheart wouldn't question her any further.

After a couple more tries to prod Smallfire awake, Frostfeather sat back with a huff. "Smallfire, wake up!" she shouted.

Pineheart bent to sniff the tom's fur. Heat radiated from his ungroomed pelt. "I think he's got a fever," he whispered after a short pause.

"I'll go and get Brokensong," she mewed before she turned and disappeared out the side of the bush. Pineheart could hear Smallfire's labored breaths. Every now and then, his legs would jerk from a random muscle spasm. *Hopefully its just greencough*, he thought.

After what felt like an eternity, Brokensong finally poked her narrow snout through the leaves. "Frostfeather says Smallfire is sick," she mewed..

She stooped down to sniff his fur, but he flinched away. "Don't touch me!" he snapped, "I'm fine!"

"You don't look fine!" Brokensong retorted, "but now that you're awake, we can leave. I don't want to hear you complaining, either!"

Pineheart gasped at the medicine cat. He wondered why she would act so cold and angry. *She must just be scared, like the rest of us.*

Reluctantly, Smallfire stumbled to his paws. Pineheart could feel the fever as it rolled off of him in waves. He let the shaky tom lean against him for support as they exited the makeshift den.

The others had waited for their arrival. Sootsplash, along with Meadowshine, Sweetmind, and Lionpaw, sat at the base of a nearby tree. Lionpaw looked completely exhausted, her whiskers sagged.

Meadowshine also appeared worn out, her tortoiseshell fur dull and messy. Elkleap hovered a few paces away while he stared off into the distance, back the way they had come. *He's the loneliest out of us all*, Pineheart realized.

Sootsplash had his family to care for, as well as Sweetmind. She had clung to them like nettle. She was still overcome from her mother and sister's deaths. Brokensong didn't seem too upset over the loss of her littermate, Weaseltail. But she had always been good at hiding her emotions, which was something all medicine cats learned over time.

And that leaves me, Frostfeather, and Smallfire. And we are littermates, Pineheart thought. Smallfire leaned hard against his flank as his breath came in wheezing gasps.

"Will you be ok?" Pineheart whispered in his ear. He just replied with an angry flick of his tail, his yellow eyes narrowed as they made their way to the others.

"We will be leaving now," Brokensong announced after everyone had gathered. She began to lead the patrol away, with Sootsplash, Meadowshine, Lionpaw, and Elkleap right on her tail. Frostfeather lingered for a few moments before she followed.

"Alright, we are going to start moving," Pineheart warned as he started to take a few steps forward. To his relief, Smallfire was

perfectly capable to walk. He wobbled a bit as they first set off, but fell into a listless pace after several heartbeats.

Pineheart remained stuck to his side. He was sure if he joined the rest of the group, it was possible for Smallfire to get left behind. *Or picked off by some hungry animal*, he thought.

It seemed like Brokensong had lead them around the mountain, towards even more hill and valleys that faded into the distance. Pineheart could see the rest of the patrol as they raced further and further away from him and his companion.

"Wait up!" he yowled after them. He noticed Frostfeather glance back, and then bound forward to say something to Brokensong. Thankfully, they slowed enough for Pineheart and Smallfire to catch up.

They were all quiet as they traveled onward, too focused on the path ahead. Pineheart lost track of how many valleys they had climbed, how many they had descended.

After awhile, his flanks began to snarl with hunger. The sun had already crossed the sky to dip back down towards the treetops once more. "Should we take a break to try and find some prey?" he suggested.

Lionpaw looked up at Sootsplash expectantly as her belly also grumbled with hunger. But Brokensong already replied, "No! We need to get as far as we can while there's still light. After the sun sets, we can take a break."

"And after the sun sets, there won't be any prey," Pineheart growled under his breath. After only a short trek longer, the valleys finally came to an end. But something new and frightening loomed in their way.

It seemed to be a river of darkness, but instead of water it was a solid, rock like substance. It constantly swarmed with huge, metal beasts with balls of light that glared in their eyes.

The patrol stopped on the verge to watch the monsters as they

screeched by on their own, personal journeys. "I don't know how we are supposed to get across," Brokensong fretted just as she began to pace and sniff at the grass at the edge of the black river.

"Maybe we should wait, and see if StarClan sends us a message," Elkleap offered, his voice kind and tender as he addressed the medicine cat.

Despite his kindness, her eyes flared with rage. "Do you really think StarClan are going to send us a message?! StarClan aren't here!"

Pineheart felt his pelt tingle at her harsh words. *Of course StarClan was with them. Where else would they be?*

Smallfire started to wheeze while they sat at the edge of a small bush. He could hear the leaves beside him rustle from the monster's wind as they rushed by. "Brokensong, I think Smallfire needs herbs for his breathing," Pineheart announced.

Brokensong snapped her attention towards the two toms. But her gaze was not focused directly on them, but at the bush that quivered just behind their tails. "Brokensong, are you ok?" he questioned.

"Shhh! Be quiet!" she hissed as she stared at the jostled foliage, "I think we are being watched!"

Chapter Thirteen {Edited}

Frostfeather scanned the leafy branches that hung behind her brother. She tried to set her eyes on what Brokensong had seen. *Who's watching us?*

Elkleap stepped towards Pineheart and Smallfire, his attention fixed on the bush just beyond their haunches. "Whoever you are, come out now!" he growled. The monsters on the path beside them screeched and thundered on their journey passed, oblivious to what occurred on the thin strip of grass.

After several long heartbeats, a lithe shape leaped from the cover of the shadows. She landed in front of the toms to come and stand before Elkleap.

Brokensong gasped in astonishment as she sauntered closer. "You're... you're Dewdrop, aren't you?" she stammered. Her whiskers twitched in amazement, her eyes darted all over the silver pelted stranger.

"Yes, but I have not been called that name in some moons," she purred, "I have lived on my own since BreezeClan was defeated."

"Why didn't you want to come live with your Clanmates in IceClan?" Elkleap pondered, "they had assumed you were dead."

Dewdrop's eyes sparkled with fury as she retorted, "and I had thought they'd been killed by IceClan scum!"

She cast her attention over their small group. "It doesn't look like any of them are with you. How am I to know that IceClan didn't kill them all?" Frostfeather gasped in surprise, *how could she think that?*

"Your Clanmates lived peaceful lives in IceClan before a sickness spread over the forest. Right before we left, wolves attacked the camp and left many dead. We are all that are left," Elkleap meowed gently, "I'm sorry we could not have been blessed with more

BreezeClan survivors."

Frostfeather could see sadness flash across the features of the old BreezeClan medicine cat. Her shoulders hunched as she let out a small, strangled sigh. "I see..." she murmured.

Brokensong rested her tail tip lightly against Dewdrop's side. "But we do have some descendants of your old Clanmates. Smallfire is Foxstreak's son. And I'm sure you remember Frostkit and Pinekit. They've grown up, and are also fortunate to be traveling with us."

Dewdrop's interest instantly turned towards Frostfeather. She thought she saw malice in her expression but it disappeared in the blink of an eye. "So, Blizzardstar is not with you?" she asked slowly.

"No, Blizzardstar gave his life to allow us all to escape," Pineheart spoke as he stood and started to guide Smallfire closer to the rest of the patrol.

A smirk spread across Dewdrop's face. Frostfeather opened her mouth to confront her, but Elkleap had already began to reply, "if you'd like to travel with us, we wouldn't mind. We are trying to find a new territory, away from this sickness."

"Yes, I think I'd like that," Dewdrop confessed, "it'll be nice to be in the company of Clan cats once more." Her reply sounded sincere but everything about this situation sent a wave of doubt over Frostfeather's fur.

"Now, we just need to figure out how to cross this," Elkleap commented as he swung around to stare across the black river once more.

"Oh, that? I've crossed this Thunderpath dozens of times," Dewdrop chimed, "you just have to wait until the thundering stops and then race across as quick as you can!"

Sootsplash grumbled from his place beside the others, "that sounds dangerous." Frostfeather agreed, those monsters were big enough to flatten even the largest badger.

Dewdrop took a couple of pawsteps closer to the edge of the

Thunderpath. She let her paws graze the edge of the bumpy, black surface. "It's not very dangerous, really. You can feel the vibrations in your paws. If the rumbling stops, there's plenty of time to cross."

Another monster flashed passed. Its brilliant crimson coat dazzled Frostfeather's eyes. She didn't exactly trust this strange she-cat. The delighted look on her face at the mention of Blizzardstar's demise had made her pelt crawl.

She watched as Dewdrop lined her Clanmates up next to the verge of the dark path. "It's best to go in small groups. Everyone should pair themselves with another cat," she instructed.

Pineheart remained next to Smallfire while Elkleap slunk closer to Lionpaw. Sootsplash took up his position beside Meadowshine. That left Frostfeather with Sweetmind, the timid, calico she-cat.

They waited there for some time, while monsters constantly rushed by on the Thunderpath. "This is taking forever!" Lionpaw wailed.

"Hush, Dewdrop needs to concentrate," Meadowshine scolded her. Frostfeather sunk her claws into the grass, anticipation swirling like a storm in her chest.

Miraculously, the endless quake of the monsters eased. "Whoever is going first needs to be ready," Dewdrop warned.

Elkleap traipsed forward with Lionpaw practically glued to his side. His tail wrapped protectively over her back and down her flank. As the monsters disappeared, Dewdrop howled, "Now!"

Elkleap sprang onto the surface of the Thunderpath and flew in the direction of the opposite side. Lionpaw seemed like a blur of russet fur as she kept pace with him and finally came to rest in the grass on the other side.

"See, easy," Dewdrop purred. Frostfeather still wasn't convinced. Next came Sootsplash and Meadowshine, who crossed without incident. It sounded like the monsters had taken a break.

"Next," Dewdrop urged as Pineheart and Smallfire inched forward. As they started to hobble across, Frostfeather was painfully aware

how slow they were.

In the distance, the hum of monsters once more vibrated the oily, black surface. Frostfeather held her breath until Pineheart and Smallfire fell into the soft grasses on the other side.

"We will have to wait again," Brokensong murmured as the Thunderpath erupted with the harsh sounds of monsters as they shot passed. All that remained was Brokensong, Dewdrop, Sweetmind, and Frostfeather.

"Do you know where you're headed after this?" Dewdrop questioned Brokensong as they waited for their chance to cross.

"I figured we could just keep moving onward. The sun sets in front of us, so we can just keep following that," she explained. Dewdrop nodded and turned her attention back to the Thunderpath.

"I think our chance is coming," Dewdrop mewed, "you'll have to cross by yourself so that I can instruct you." Brokensong nodded in response.

Frostfeather could feel Sweetmind tremble next to her. She watched with wide eyes as the monsters ceased and Brokensong flung herself across the Thunderpath. Her black tipped tail vanished into the bushes where the others had stopped to wait.

"Your turn next," Dewdrop meowed as Frostfeather and Sweetmind stepped up to the edge. She glanced back at Dewdrop as foreboding boiled deep in her limbs.

"Alright, go!" she grunted. As Frostfeather went to take her first leap onto the path, something solid snagged hold of her tail. The pain made her stagger, like hot needles up her spine.

She turned to see that Dewdrop had her tail tip firmly clamped between her jaws. With a defiant yowl, she tore her tail free and scrambled to catch up to Sweetmind. But as she neared the center of the path, a screech sounded from down the Thunderpath. She stopped and lay her eyes on a monster that hurtled straight towards her.

Oh no, I'm done for! She felt her limbs freeze with shock, too numb to move. But just as the monster was about to strike, something pushed her out of the way. With a thud, she landed on the side of the Thunderpath. The monster swerved away in a cloud of gritty smoke and dust.

Frostfeather stared back across the path to set her eyes on Dewdrop. The gray medicine cat glared back at her, her face creased with fury. She lifted her head to look where she had been frozen to the black surface. What she saw made her heart start to slam against her rib cage.

In the middle of the Thunderpath, lay a smear of bright orange, white, and black fur. "Sweetmind!" Frostfeather cried. Dewdrop advanced across the path in a few moments, her tail twitched behind her.

She felt Dewdrop grab her scruff as she started to drag her across the last section of the road. "Let me go!" she shouted, "I need to get Sweetmind!"

"She's as good as dead," Dewdrop hissed around her fur. She twisted her body to attempt to free herself, but Dewdrop just clenched her teeth harder into the soft skin of her scruff.

As they finally padded onto the opposite side, Frostfeather felt Dewdrop release her as she was dropped into the furry embrace of the lush grass.

"Where's Sweetmind?" Elkleap asked. Frostfeather wanted to answer, she wanted to confess they had left Sweetmind's body, crushed, back on the Thunderpath.

Why? Why did you have to save me, she thought wretchedly as the angry hum of the monsters intensified and swallowed up the lifeless body of Sweetmind.

Chapter Fourteen {Edited}

Pineheart joined the other warriors beside the barren bushes. His pelt was still spiked with fear from his perilous journey with Smallfire across the Thunderpath. The orange and white tom had lay down to rest, his fever threatened to overwhelm him.

"Where's Sweetmind?" Pineheart heard Elkleap ask as he approached. He glanced towards Frostfeather and noticed that the calico she-cat was nowhere in sight.

Dewdrop stepped around from behind Frostfeather, her expression dark. "She got caught under the paws of a monster. We couldn't save her."

Pineheart flinched with shock. Sweetmind is dead?

"She was trying to save me," Frostfeather choked, her voice drowned with a sob. Pineheart wondered what exactly had happened. *If Dewdrop was keeping watch, there shouldn't have been any chance of this occurring.*

Elkleap bowed his head. "That's a shame. At least it was a noble death. One of a true warrior."

Brokensong also spoke up, her face stunned with distress but her voice strong, "yes, she knew the sacrifice she was making. If she was saving you from the paws of a monster, it was truly the death of a warrior."

Pineheart leaned closer to Frostfeather to try and ease her pain. He could feel her anguish like hot sludge on his pelt. "It'll be ok..." he murmured, "she knew what she was doing." The familiar words seemed to tumble out of his mouth. *Those were almost the exact words she said to me about Blizzardstar.*

"I think it's Dewdrop's fault!" Frostfeather hissed, quiet enough for only him to hear. He glanced up to see her glare at the silver pelted

medicine cat. Her eyes were narrowed with intense fury.

"How is it her fault? She was the one who was helping us to cross," he asked softly. He couldn't deny he had found the situation fishy, but why would Dewdrop want to harm them?

"She snagged my tail when I tried to cross! She must have wanted me to get hit, but it was Sweetmind instead!" Her voice rose to a helpless wail. She had gained the attention of the other warriors, who eyed her curiously.

"You've been through quite a shock," Elkleap murmured as he inched closer to Frostfeather, "but we should keep moving and stop dwelling on what happened. Sweetmind wouldn't want you to blame yourself."

Frostfeather shook her head, her suspicions going unnoticed. But Pineheart knew she couldn't be imagining it. For whatever reason, Dewdrop was trying to sabotage them!

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After a short breather, the patrol set off once more. They followed Brokensong's suggestion, to head towards the sunset.

As they plodded along, Brokensong started to formally introduce Dewdrop to the others.

"I'm sure you already know this is Elkleap," she began as she pointed her tail towards the black and brown striped tom.

"Ah, yes. And I know Sootsplash and Meadowshine as well," Dewdrop confirmed, "I may be getting old but my memory is still sharp. I remember seeing them along the border back when BreezeClan was still around."

"That was some time ago," Brokensong agreed, "but Sootsplash and Meadowshine also have a daughter." Brokensong turned her head to look at Lionpaw. "Her name is Lionpaw. She used to have a littermate as well. Her name was Shimmerpaw, but she died when the sickness started to overtake our camp."
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"That's a shame," Dewdrop commented, "wherever we are going, we will need more young cats." *Yeah, too bad you killed Sweetmind*, Frostfeather fumed.

"We will have to figure it out when we get there," Elkleap grunted, "no sense worrying about it now."

Brokensong flicked her tail and continued her introductions to Dewdrop. "The white she-cat is Frostfeather, and the black tom is Pineheart. I figured you would recognize them, since you were the one who helped Spottedrose during her kitting."

"Ah, yes... they did look familiar," she agreed. Frostfeather squinted her eyes and stared angrily at the back of Dewdrop's head. *What in StarClan's name is she up to*, she wondered.

"Smallfire is the white and orange tom. He has been a bit under the weather since we left. I think he just needs a proper camp to rest in, with warm nests and fresh kill," Brokensong continued.

Frostfeather noticed Dewdrop's ears perk with mild interest. *What's she thinking now*, she pondered.

"If he has a fever we should stop and find some feverfew," Dewdrop insisted. She glanced up at the sky, which had already become streaked with the faint rays of the sunset. "I'm sure everyone could do with a rest."

They had traveled at a steady pace since they departed from the Thunderpath. No one was sure how long they'd have to walk before they reached a new home, but hopefully it was sooner rather than later.

After they had left the noisy Thunderpath, they hadn't encountered even a single strip of forest. Vast, grassy plains stretched into the distance, only lightly dusted with the frosty touch of snow.

"I'm not exactly sure where you're expecting us to rest," Sootsplash grumbled, "I'm not going to have Lionpaw and Meadowshine sleeping out in the open."

Elkleap rolled his eyes and reared back on his hind paws to inspect

the horizon for any sign of trees. After a second, he dropped back down and turned to the others. "I still don't see any signs of a forest. I'll scout ahead to see if I can find any other shelter. Just stay put."

The tom bounded away into the tall, dense grass. Dewdrop faced Pineheart and Smallfire and walked closer towards them. "How are you feeling, Smallfire?" she asked kindly.

He groaned and flopped onto his side. "I'm so thirsty," he croaked.

"You'll feel better after we eat some prey," Pineheart reasoned as he bent over to nuzzle Smallfire's flank.

The patrol waited for some time for Elkleap to return. Darkness began to creep across the field, shrouding the Clan cats in shadow. "Maybe we should go looking for him," Meadowshine declared, "something could have happened."

Lionpaw whimpered and snuggled closer to her mother's side. "I'm sure Elkleap's fine," Brokensong replied curtly.

She was right; after only a few more minutes, Elkleap reappeared from the depths of the frost-tipped grass. "I found us an abandoned badger set. It's big enough for us all to sleep in," he reported in excitement.

"That sounds perfect," Brokensong mused, "lead the way."

The entire patrol slowly got to their paws and followed after Elkleap as he led them to the badger set. Dewdrop kept herself to the back of the group. She hovered close behind Pineheart and Smallfire, her head low.

"After we are all settled, Pineheart, Sootsplash, and I are going to go hunting to try and find some prey," Elkleap ordered casually over his shoulder. Frostfeather glanced up at the sky, where only a streak of sunshine remained. Hopefully they could manage to find something.

Frostfeather felt her stomach groan with hunger. After some fresh-kill and a long rest, they'd be ready for whatever this journey managed to throw their way.

Chapter Fifteen {Edited}

The badger den was certainly big enough for everyone to sleep comfortably inside. Meadowshine and Lionpaw curled together near the back wall, while Dewdrop still clung close to Smallfire's huddled form.

Frostfeather watched Meadowshine as she wound tighter around Lionpaw, tortoiseshell and sandy orange fur merged into a cozy blanket.

Brokensong sat just a short way down from the den entrance. She stared out the hole, her one good eye transfixed on the night sky above them. Her brown and black pelt rippled as she raised her muzzle to take a sniff of the chilly air. "I think I can smell them," she murmured. Frostfeather got to her paws and padded over just as Elkleap appeared at the mouth of the den. His mouth was crammed with prey.

The white and black form of Sootsplash came next. He carried the plump body of a squirrel, which he immediately carried towards his mate and kit. Lastly came Pineheart, his head bent down from the weight of the rabbit he carried.

"The prey is so plentiful here," Elkleap rejoiced as he dropped his freshkill in the center of the den. Brokensong stood at his shoulder and looked down at the pile with famished eyes.

"We haven't eaten this well since before we left camp," she recalled, "well done, all of you."

Frostfeather grabbed a mouse from the pile and joined Pineheart near the side of the burrow. She could feel the earthen wall press against her flank as she made herself comfortable. To Pineheart's other side lay Smallfire. Dewdrop had grabbed him a mouse, but he only grumbled and curled tighter as he fell back to sleep.

"We need to do something for Smallfire," Dewdrop fretted as the

others began to tuck into their meals, "he's only going to get worse and slow us down."

Brokensong snorted. "I tried to treat him before we left the territory but he didn't want my help. He's going to have to wait until we find somewhere that grows the herbs we need." Frostfeather hadn't thought she would still be prickly over that ordeal.

Dewdrop dipped her head in submission to the other medicine cat. "That seems wise..." she agreed.

As the moon ascended further into the star speckled sky, the den filled with the soft snores of the Clan cats as they fell asleep. Elkleap lay close to the entrance, one ear alert for any signs of trouble.

Frostfeather let her tired gaze rest on every one of her Clanmates as she snuggled closer to Pineheart's side. *Hopefully we find a home soon*, she thought as she closed her eyes and drifted into slumber.

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Frostfeather felt the sting of the chilly, night air as it whipped against her muzzle. *How is there wind down here, underground*, she wondered as she blinked open her eyes.

To her amazement, she was not curled up in the den next to her brother. She was in the field, the thick grasses waved around her as they were buffeted by the breeze. The sky was still dark, spattered with stars that pulsated above her. She glanced down at her paws and noticed that the ground was littered with star studded paw prints. She took a deep breath and detected the scent of other cats nearby.

She bounced forward and followed the shimmering tracks until she practically crashed into the back of a cat. She couldn't believe her eyes, it was Wildflight! Her dusty, brown fur shined with starlight. All of her old age had disappeared to be replaced with taught muscles and a confident stride.

Ahead of her, a massive sea of pelts traveled towards the horzon.
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She could pick up so many scents; Blizzardstar, Nightvolt, Redfern, Shimmerpaw, Sweetmind... and even ten fold more that she could not even begin to name.

"We have to keep moving!" an achingly familiar voice called from somewhere just ahead, "we must keep going, to the sea!"

She squinted hard to try and make out the white fur of her father. "Blizzardstar! Blizzardstar, I'm here!" she yowled, but no one acknowledged her desperate cries. She started to push through the crowd, but the StarClan spirits did not stir at her touch.

"When do you think we will arrive?" A gray pelted she-cat blurted. Frostfeather picked up her pace until she ran along beside the sparkly pelted cat. Her breath puffed out of her open jaws in shallow gasps. She wasn't sure how long she could keep up.

"I am not sure, Quickwater. But we need to be sure that we get there as fast as possible. Wherever IceClan are to settle, StarClan will be waiting for them," Blizzardstar replied.

Frostfeather felt a vibrant warmth spread over her fur. She had not realized StarClan were so vast, there were so many cats...

Finally, she rested her eyes on the ivory pelt of Blizzardstar. She wanted to run to him, to bury her muzzle in his soft fur. But she didn't want to take the risk, the illusion could break at any moment. She knew she was meant to see this vision.

Next to Blizzardstar padded the silky calico she-cat, Spottedrose. Their tails twined like ivy, their pelts brushed as they walked side-by-side.

Wherever IceClan goes, StarClan will be waiting for us...

"We will continue to follow the setting sun. Eventually, we will find our new home!" a white and gray spotted she-cat called out to the others.

Yowls and cheers erupted as the StarClan cats continued on their invisible path towards the sunset. Frostfeather let out her own joyous howl as the pelts of the StarClan cats pressed all around her.

But as soon as she blinked, the vision snapped from her view and she was once more in the musty badger den with her companions.

Chapter Sixteen {Edited}

Pineheart could hear the others as they finally shuffled awake in the depths of the abandoned badger den. Faint rays of sunlight bathed the grassy meadow, warming his dark fur. The vibrant shine heralded a new dawn.

Frostfeather had woken him up early. She claimed that she had had a strange dream about StarClan. She said they had shown her that they had traveled in the right direction. "Hopefully that means we don't have too far to travel," he murmured as soft pawsteps started to advance towards them.

Brokensong's head poked from the burrow's entrance. Her one good eye still twitched with tiredness. "Why are you guys up so early?" she asked.

Pineheart chuckled and shook his head. "Frostfeather hates to sleep in. I'm sure if she did, her tail might explode." Frostfeather snorted and jabbed him with an outstretched paw.

"You shouldn't tease your littermate," Elkleap's deep voice grumbled as he padded passed Brokensong and out into the open.

Pineheart rolled his eyes. *I'll tease her all I want...* he thought mutinously. As the others started to wake and stumble from the darkness of the den, Frostfeather beckoned Brokensong over with a wave of her tail.

Pineheart retreated a few paw steps, but remained close as Brokensong joined them. "Is something wrong?" she inquired. She searched the siblings' expression with her copper tinted eye.

"No, no there's nothing wrong," Frostfeather assured her, "I had a dream!"

Brokensong sank back on her haunches. "A dream? What sort of dream?"

Frostfeather took a short breath before she began. "I had opened my eyes, back up in the meadow. But I could smell so many cats! And when I ran to catch up to them..." she fell silent for a moment before she continued, "I couldn't believe my eyes! It was StarClan!"

Brokensong's mouth fell open in shock, her eye grew wide. "StarClan? They came to you?" Her voice trembled with emotion at the mention of their ancestors.

"Yes, they visited me... I think they wanted to tell me that we are going the right way." She stopped as she realized that Brokensong literally shivered with joy.

"Oh! Oh, this is great news!" she rejoiced, "we have to tell the others!"

Pineheart briefly touched his muzzle to Frostfeather's shoulder. "At least StarClan is speaking to someone," he muttered.

She closed her eyes and inhaled the warmth of his scent. As she opened them, she shook out her fur and trotted over to join Brokensong and the others.

Pineheart watched her go. He still wasn't sure how he felt, that his sister seemed to be closer to StarClan than to him. But hopefully their rift would not last. He took a moment before he followed, his head lowered as he came to sit behind her.

"Starclan shared with me in a dream," Frostfeather had begun to retell, "they were showing me which way we should go!" Pineheart could see the other cats' eyes as they glistened with wonder while she continued. "They told me to follow the setting sun, in the direction of the sea."

"What's the sea?" Lionpaw squeaked, her pelt spiked like a pile of pine needles.

Frostfeather shook her head. "I am not sure. But if we follow the sun, we should find it eventually."

Elkleap shouldered forward and turned to address his companions. His tail flicked with absolute excitement. "I think we should leave as

soon as we can! Now that we know which way to go, we should arrive to our new home in no time at all!"

Pineheart nodded in agreement, there was no sense in sticking around for too long. But there was one small mew of disagreement. It was from Dewdrop.

"Smallfire is still unwell," she fretted, "I think a small patrol should go looking for herbs before we leave."

Brokensong let out a gusty sigh. Her pelt already began to prickle with irritation. "I told you... we could look for herbs when we get to a forest!"

Dewdrop's eyes sparkled with anger as she stomped up to Brokensong. "I know you don't care about BreezeClan blood, so why don't you just say it! You'd rather Smallfire die!" Pineheart stifled a gasp.

Brokensong recoiled. "How can you say that! I was the one who helped Foxstreak deliver Smallfire! Of course I want him to live!"

"Well he won't live without herbs," Dewdrop snarled stubbornly. Her ears lowered, flat against her skull. It almost looked like a fight was about to erupt.

"Fine! Take a warrior with you to look for herbs. But as soon as you return, we are leaving!" Brokensong shouted. Pineheart stared in an astonished silence at the exchange between the two medicine cats. He had never seen Brokensong so upset. The one-eyed medicine cat paced away, her tail flicking.

"Hey, you," Dewdrop's silky voice called. Pineheart turned his attention towards her and noticed she must have meant him. She was looking straight at him, her eyes like daggers.

"Errr... my name is Pineheart," he mumbled.

"Yes, yes. I know your name," she grunted as she slunk towards him. "I want you to help me and Smallfire look for herbs." Her tone felt restrained, like forced through clenched jaws.

"Shouldn't Smallfire be resting?" he asked, confused. The young warrior hadn't even the energy to eat. Let alone to go wander in search of herbs.

"No, he should come with us. That way I can give him the herbs as soon as we find them. Brokensong already made it quite clear how much of a hurry we are in," she grumbled in reply. *That makes sense, I suppose.*

Pineheart shot a glance towards Smallifre, who had slumped in a nearby patch of flattened grass. His fur was unkempt and he stank of fever and sickness. He padded over, his tail flicked nervously as he neared. "Hey, Smallfire... Dewdrop wants us to go look for herbs now," he meowed as he bent down to nuzzle his friend's forehead.

At his touch, Smallfire shrank back with a hiss. "Don't touch me!" he yowled. Pineheart felt his heart sink. Smallfire really did need herbs if he was going to keep going.

"Come on, we are going to find you some herbs. They'll make you feel better, I promise," Pineheart pleaded. He felt relief wash over him as Smallfire stood up on shaky paws.

He led the frail orange and white tom as Dewdrop beckoned him into the thick grasses. The silver and white medicine cat trotted quick through the stems. In her haste, she left Pineheart and Smallfire to walk by themselves.

"Did you hear what Frostfeather said? About StarClan?" Pineheart asked Smallfire, his voice low. He leaned in so his fur barely caressed Smallfire's flank, not even a mouse length between them. He could hear the excited meows of the others fade behind them as they padded further and further away.

"Yeah, I heard," he snorted, "but it doesn't matter anyways."

"Why doesn't it matter?" Pineheart asked, his voice shrank to a whisper.

"Dewdrop's been talking with me... telling me all these crazy things..." his voice shook with the effort it took him to speak. "She

told me how we should be enemies. That I'm a BreezeClan warrior."

Pineheart's jaw dropped with disbelief. "Do you believe her?" he countered, "our mothers were best friends... we were practically littermates!" Why would Dewdrop say such things?!

Smallfire let out a small wail. His eyes were glazed with confusion. "She... she told me... I need to make BreezeClan proud. She told me..." Suddenly, Smallfire collapsed to the ground. Pineheart felt frozen with panic as he watched Smallfire begin to wreathe on the grass in front of him.

"Dewdrop! Dewdrop, help!" he yowled. But the shifty medicine cat did not reappear.

"Pineheart!" Smallfire gasped, his eyes wild as he looked up at his friend. "You need to run! Get out of here!"

"But I can't leave you," Pineheart sobbed, "I'm sure she just found the herbs! You need to hold on!" *Yes, Dewdrop will come with the herbs and you'll feel much better!*

"Oh, no sweet Pineheart. I didn't find the herbs," Dewdrop's mew drifted towards him from a few paces away. "Smallfire is infected! And now, he is going to make BreezeClan proud by killing you!"

Pineheart twirled around to try and find where exactly her voice had come from. "No! Smallfire would never hurt me!" he snarled, "and he isn't infected! He is just sick..." *But what else could it possibly be? No... he can't be infected*!

Pineheart's brave words died on his tongue as Smallfire started to lift himself to his paws. His eyes widened as he met Smallfire's gaze. His normal, yellow irises were stained a blood red, something Pineheart could recall all too well. *That's how Nightvolt looked when he killed Shimmerpaw*! Smallfire's limbs were taught with tension as he stared at Pineheart. Sanity fought to keep control but Pineheart could tell his will was all but diminished.

"I told you to run," he coughed. His sides heaved as he fought for air. A thin stream of blood dripped from his jaws.

"No, Smallfire. Don't do this," he wailed as he took a step back. But he felt his haunches meet solid fur as Dewdrop pushed him into the dirt.

"Let me go!" he screeched.

Dewdrop's muzzle came close to his ear, her breath stank of crow food. "No one will save you now," she hissed. But Pineheart had shifted his attention back to Smallfire. The tom had turned, his red stained eyes fixed on Dewdrop.

With a snarl, he launched himself forward and pushed her off of Pineheart. Quick as a snake, Pineheart leaped up and turned to help his den mate. What he saw was enough to slam his muscles to an instant halt. Smallfire had Dewdrop's throat in a death grip, blood gushed from the sides of his mouth. Pineheart could see the strength in his jaw as he bit into her as hard as he could. *Why is this happening again*, he thought in frantic bewilderment.

Dewdrop's limbs had grown limp. Her eyes glazed over as her blood oozed into the dirt. "Why?" Pineheart whimpered.

Smallfire opened his mouth to let Dewdrop's lifeless body fall to the ground. "She had to die," Smallfire insisted, "and now, I have to die too."

Pineheart's whiskers quivered with sadness. "I can't lose you too," he choked. His heart slammed painfully in his chest. "We were supposed to find a new home, and be happy... you were going to get herbs to treat your sickness. We would have been safe!" How foolish was I to think we would be ok, he thought.

"That was never going to happen for me," Smallfire chuckled, "I knew the moment that wolf bit me back at the old camp, my fate was sealed." Smallfire lifted a paw to expose an angry, red gouge in his chest. "But you have to kill me, quick. I don't know how much longer I can keep control."

Pineheart opened his mouth, ready to object. But no words came. He stepped forward to bury his muzzle in Smallfire's neck fur. "I'll never forget you," he mumbled, his voice quivered with a fresh

surge of grief.

"Ugh, I can't... I can't..." Smallfire flinched back and shook his head. A soft snarl escaped his parted jaws, his eyes glazed as he turned back towards Pineheart.

Goodbye, Smallfire... Pineheart leaped forward and pushed him into the ground. Without any time to react, Pineheart dug his teeth into his neck. He had to hold back an intense force to gag as Smallfire's throat opened and poured thick blood into his mouth. He could feel Smallfire's body start to grow heavy as his head rolled back onto the grass.

"StarClan," Smallfire gurgled as blood trickled from his mouth, "that's my home, now..."

Pineheart took a step back as he heard the last breath escape Smallfire's ravaged body. It felt like his mind couldn't even understand what happened. He sat there for some time before any of the others came for him. It was Elkleap.

"Great StarClan, what happened?!" he exclaimed. Pineheart tore his gaze away from Smallfire's lifeless body to look up at his Clanmate.

"He... he... he attacked Dewdrop," he stammered, still overcome with shock and grief.

Elkleap closed his eyes and bowed his head. "He must have been infected..." he murmured, "help me carry him and Dewdrop back to the others."

Pineheart gently took Smallfire's scruff in his mouth as he followed Elkleap back to their Clanmates. But how was he going to explain what Smallfire had told him?

Chapter Seventeen

Frostfeather watched in dismay as Pineheart and Elkleap reappeared from the foliage. They were both burdened by bloodied bodies, almost unrecognizable beneath the gore.

"What happened!" Brokensong demanded, her tail flicking back and fourth.

Pineheart gently rested Smallfire's corpse on the ground. He took a deep breath before speaking, "Dewdrop tried to convince Smallfire to attack me," Pineheart meowed, "but he attacked her instead."

I knew I was right about her, Frostfeather thought angrily, *what a foxheart!*

"So did Dewdrop kill Smallfire?" Lionpaw whimpered, peeking around Meadowshine's tortoiseshell fur to look at her dead Clanmate.

Pineheart shuffled his paws, "not exactly..." he mumbled, "Smallfire told me that he had been infected. He showed me a bite on his chest that he had gotten back in the old camp from one of the wolves."

Brokensong quickly padded forward to inspect the orange and white tom. She lifted his foreleg, exposing the angry red bite mark in his chest.

"He... he told me I had to kill him. He didn't want to lose control and kill anyone," he sobbed.

Frostfeather padded closer to her brother, feeling grief pulse through her body. "I can't believe Smallfire was infected... I thought we left that all behind us, back at the camp."

Elkleap bent down, letting Dewdrop's body flop to the ground. "Before we leave, we should hold a burial. It's what Smallfire

deserves," he meowed solemnly.

The others murmured their agreement, still too stricken from shock to speak. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that," Frostfeather breathed into his ear.

He leaned into her, his limbs as stiff as tree trunks. *How much more will we have to bear?*

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The IceClan cats stood in a ragged circle around the shallow grave they had dug. "It's not perfect, but it'll be enough to send Smallfire on his way to StarClan," Brokensong meowed.

The tall grasses of the meadow stood like sentries as the Clan cats mourned their fallen comrade. Slowly, Elkleap nudged the deceased tom until he nestled snuggly into his final resting place. They stood, gripped in an ice-like silence, as Brokensong started to recite the traditional farewell to all warriors on their journey to StarClan.

"Smallfire was a young, noble warrior. He served his Clan well; embarking on this trek despite the fact he had fallen ill at the start. We will never forget his sacrifice."

Sootsplash pulled Meadowshine closer to his side, his gaze dark as he looked down at Smallfire in his grave.

"May he find peace amongst the stars," she finished, bowing her head. Elkleap began to shift the dirt over his pelt, letting the earth take hold of his physical form.

"I still can't believe this happened," Frostfeather mewed, "but I'm glad it wasn't you instead." She leaned into Pineheart, relishing the warmth of his ebony fur.

"I guess I'm glad too. But I don't think I'll ever get the taste of his blood out of my mouth..." he choked, his pelt shuddering from the thought.

The patrol bowed their heads as the final pawful of dirt was placed on the tiny grave. After several moments, Brokensong rose her voice
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to address the group, "we shouldn't delay in continuing our journey. We took the time to put Smallfire to rest, but now we should head out."

No one argued. Their earlier elation at StarClan's message had all but evaporated to be replaced with a stone-like grief.

Frostfeather glanced at the sky, noticing that it was already past sunhigh. "It'll be easy to follow the path with the sun in front of us," she commented.

Pineheart grunted, his face blank like an emotionless slab. The patrol started to slowly pad away, casting sad glances back at the mound of dirt that hid their Clanmate from view.

Elkleap took the lead, making sure to take note of the sun's position before they padded onward. *So much heartache and grief, are we even going to know how it feels to be happy after all of this?*

Without Smallfire at his side, Pineheart clung to Frostfeather's side. She wished that he would confide in her, but knew better than to push the subject.

After some time, the Clan cats eventually left the grassy meadow behind. Ahead of them, a vast system of forests and swamps stretched into the distance. Dusk had settled, replacing the calm blue sky.

"What if we get lost and can't find the sun?" Meadowshine asked fretfully as they embarked beneath the shadowy trees. Frostfeather felt her pelt shiver as the darkness engulfed the patrol.

"Well then we would have someone climb a tree and look for which way the sun is setting," Brokensong answered matter-of-factly.

"These woods seem spooky..." Lionpaw squeaked, her tail curling down to come between her legs.

"Don't worry, we will protect you," Sootsplash reassured her. Frostfeather was surprised to find that even his white pelt was spiked with unease.

"We should probably try and rest for the night and continue in the morning," Elkleap offered just as Frostfeather's jaws opened with a massive yawn.

A lone owl hooted from somewhere nearby, sending shivers down Frostfeather's spine. This forest had a very sinister vibe. "I don't think we should stay here long..." she meowed, "we should leave as soon as there's enough light to see."

The ground squished under their paws as they trekked further into the darkness. Tendrils of fern and ivy stretched across their path, threatening to trip any cat who wasn't watching their paws.

Finally, they neared a suitable resting place. A massive bush, heavy with berries, lay in their sights. Underneath it's branches was enough room for every cat to curl up and get some sleep.

Elkleap warily sniffed at the branches, his tail flicking. "I can smell fox," he meowed, "maybe I'll just keep watch until dawn. I'm not that tired anyways."

Brokensong touched her nose to his cheek before squeezing under the leafy branches. Lionpaw and Meadowshine were quick to follow, with Sootsplash right behind them.

Pineheart seemed reluctant to enter but after a moment he ducked his head and slid inside. Frostfeather took a deep breath, turning towards Elkleap. He had taken up position near the edge of the bush, sitting alert as he gazed into the darkness.

"Thanks, you know... for everything," She meowed softly, "I think everyone was expecting me to take charge on this journey. I just don't have it in me, to lead like my father."

Elkleap blinked, turning to look at her. "Blizzardstar was a wise, noble leader. He wouldn't expect you to be something you're not. I don't think anyone here would, either."

Frostfeather purred, feeling gratitude like sunlight on her fur. "Goodnight, Elkleap," she whispered as she turned and vanished into the depths of the berry bush.

Chapter Eighteen

Grief as cold as winter's rain pricked at Pineheart's heart. He struggled to wake up, feeling depression like a damp blanket across his body. He could feel Frostfeather's presence as she shifted beside him.

"Are you ok, Pineheart?" she asked, a slight tremor in her voice.

"I'll be fine," he grunted, every word an effort. Slowly, he blinked his eyes open to find dawn light filtering through the branches of the bush. Unfamiliar scents of the forest bathed his tongue as he took a short breath.

It seemed like he and Frostfeather were the only ones still resting. The others' scents were already fading, replaced by the harsh odors of the berry bush.

"Everyone went out hunting. I figured you could use the sleep, so I stayed behind to keep watch," Frostfeather explained quietly.

Pineheart huffed, feeling his insides quiver with sadness. "I don't even know if I can go on," he confessed, "I didn't think this journey would be so hard."

"Of course it was going to be hard," Frostfeather scolded him gently, "we are traveling into unknown territory with only StarClan's assurance that we are going in the right direction."

"I don't know why we can't just stay here. I'm sure we could find somewhere to camp; and then we wouldn't need to travel anymore," he grumbled.

"But this isn't where StarClan wants us to be. They told us to go to the sea," she insisted, "there we will find our new home."

The scent of fresh kill suddenly overwhelmed them. "Are you two awake?" Elkleap's voice called under the bush's branches.

"Yes we will be out in a moment," Frostfeather replied. She swished her ivory tail against Pineheart's flank, hoping to cheer him up.

"I'm sure they've brought back some mice. You know how much you love the taste of mouse," she purred.

With a reluctant sigh, Pineheart pushed himself to his paws. Frostfeather followed him closely out of the makeshift den, her tail waving behind her.

"We've found plenty of prey!" Elkleap tumbled happily as the pair came to join the rest of the group.

Sootsplash, Meadowshine, and Lionpaw were all happily crunching away on a rabbit. While Brokensong had tucked into a fat pigeon only a couple paces away. Pineheart looked over the fresh kill pile for a brief moment before choosing a plump mouse for himself.

"You didn't encounter any foxes?" Frostfeather asked Elkleap, "I know you had scented them last nite."

"No I didn't find any sign of foxes. My nose might have just been playing a trick on me," he laughed, his whiskers twitching.

Frostfeather purred and bent down to take a small robin from the pile. Elkleap, last to choose, took two mice for himself.

The patrol fell into a content silence, everyone happily munching away on their warm prey. Pineheart glanced up at the forest canopy as he took his last bites of his mouse. The sun was still shining brightly, casting brilliant beams of light onto the grassy floor below.

"It's still early," he commented.

Elkleap nodded, "yeah, it's not even sunhigh yet," he mumbled around his prey.

"Does that mean I have time to go and play?" Lionpaw piped up excitedly from beside her mother and father.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea...." Meadowshine mewed, "there could be something dangerous lurking out there."

"But Elkleap said he didn't scent any foxes, right?" she asked, gazing up at Meadowshine with innocent eyes.

"Yes, I guess he did..." she conceded. She looked at Sootsplash for support but he just shrugged.

"Just don't stray too far from the group. I scented rain on the wind during our hunt," Elkleap mewed, "we should be leaving again soon."

With an excited bounce, Lionpaw sped off into the shadowy forest. Sootsplash and Meadowshine watched her leave, worried expressions across their faces.

"All that's out there is mice and butterflies. She will be ok," Elkleap assured them. The two parents leaned into each other, their fur brushing against one another.

Pineheart looked into the forest, squinting at the shadows that swallowed Lionpaw's russet pelt. "I wish Shimmerpaw was still with us. Then Lionpaw wouldn't feel so lonely," Meadowshine mewed sadly.

Pineheart noticed Elkleap's eyes glitter with sadness at the mention of his old apprentice's name. "I can see the same joy and enthusiasm that Shimmerpaw had in Lionpaw. This whole ordeal has made her stronger... it has made us all stronger."

Pineheart couldn't help but agree. They were all so different than from when they were still living in IceClan territory. "We will need all the strength we can get when we get to our new home," Brokensong meowed as she stood from her prey.

"I hope it has everything that the old territory had," Meadowshine purred wistfully, "tall trees for climbing, tiny streams for fishing, vast hills for running..."

"What about snow?" Frostfeather asked, "it's been some time since we've seen snow blanket the ground."

"Yes, IceClan was known for its snow-lined slopes. I think our new territory will have different qualities," Brokensong mewed.

A soft rain had begun to fall, slowly dripping through the top most branches of the trees. "Well, I think that's our signal to head out," Elkleap grunted, "can someone climb up and see if they can find where the sun is?"

Frostfeather volunteered and quickly swarmed up the trunk of a nearby tree. Pineheart tilted back his head, watching the shivering branches where she had climbed passed.

After only a few moments, she reappeared and leaped down to the forest floor. She pointed her tail towards the west, "it's setting in that direction."

Pineheart could feel his pelt growing damp from the trickling rain. "Someone should go and fetch Lionpaw," he meowed.

"I'll go and get her," Elkleap mewed, "after we return we can leave." With a flick of his tail, he trotted off into the trees.

Frostfeather reared her head on her paws. "I can't wait to see our new home," she sighed.

"Me either," Pineheart whispered in her ear, "I hope it's everything we want it to be."

He could feel his depression starting to fade to be replaced with optimism. They had to almost be there.

All of the sudden, they could hear someone crashing back through the undergrowth towards them. Elkleap reappeared, his brown and black pelt spiked with distress.

"Lionpaw is gone!"

Chapter Nineteen

"What do you mean she's gone?" Meadowshine shouted in disbelief.

"I can't find her anywhere! Her trail leads deeper into the forest, but there's other cat scents there as well," Elkleap explained.

"Which direction does her scent lead?" Brokensong asked.

"It heads that way for a bit before veering left," he explained.

"We will have to follow her trail!" Sootsplash growled, "if they touch a single hair on her pelt, I'll shred them!"

"We should leave at once," Elkleap meowed.

Instantly, the patrol stood and started to follow after him. Inwardly, Frostfeather wondered who would have the guts to take Lionpaw.

"Were you sure that Dewdrop was really dead?" she asked Pineheart worriedly.

"As dead as fresh-kill," he cofirmed, "it had to have been someone else."

The rest of the group was utterly silent as they trekked through the trees. A thin rain had started to fall, threatening to sweep Lionpaw's scent away.

"We need to pick up the pace! What if we lose her scent forever!" Meadowshine wailed. They started to run, Lionpaw's scent barely bathing their tongues.

Strange cat scent whirled around them, dark and menacing. Eventually, they broke through the trees to face a massive, rushing river. Frostfeather looked up at the horizon, glad to see the sun was setting in front of them.

Atleast we are still traveling in the right direction, she thought

hopefully.

As they neared the river, Sootsplash began to rapidly pace at the bank. His tail flicked angrily as he looked up and down the watery terrain. "What do we do now?" Meadowshine whimpered.

"We will have to find somewhere to cross," Elkleap explained, "Lionpaw's scent leads this way, there might be a crossing place there." He pointed his tail upstream, where a tiny path was tread through the grass.

There was no time to waste, the group started to bound upstream after her trail. Eventually, they found a suitable place to cross. An enormous oak tree had fallen across the water, making a perfect bridge for the cats to cross.

"I can smell Lionpaw," Elkleap meowed as he scoured the earth near the trunk with his nose. Sootsplash and Meadowshine instantly leapt onto the tree and ran across, fast as lightning. Brokensong was quick to follow, Frostfeather and Pineheart on her tail. The bark was slippery with rain but thankfully no one tumbled into the river below.

They were still pelting full force after the missing apprentice, not taking any time to be cautious of their new surroundings. Scant trees and bushes dotted the landscape but there was more open space than anything else.

"I think we are getting close," Sootsplash yowled. Frostfeather took a deep breath, Lionpaw's fresh scent bathing her senses.

But suddenly, a shadowed shape flew towards Sootsplash from a nearby bush. The shape landed on top of him, pushing to the ground.

"Halt!" it growled, turning to face the other Clan cats. "You're on Cassius's land!"

"You better let my daughter go, you mange breathed fox heart!" Sootsplash shrieked, bucking beneath the rogue like a bull in a blind rage.

"Oh you mean that little russet she-cat? No, I don't think we will be letting her go," the rogue sneered.

As the rest of them came to a stop, a ring of strange rogues began to surround them. "Just let her go and no one needs to get hurt," Elkleap called, his tone calm but threatening.

They all began to laugh, closing in even tighter around the group. "It'll be *you* who gets hurt," the rogue sneered.

Brokensong started to object, her good eye sparkling with fear. Frostfeather hissed as one of the rogues came closer. They were trapped.

Elkleap his head to look at his Clanmates. "Don't do anything too risky. If they take us to Lionpaw, we can get her and run."

"Stop talking!" One of the rogues snarled as they started to push the Clan cats ahead. Sootsplash was shoved into the circle along with the others, his white head hanging low with defeat.

They traveled further over the sparse grassland, the sun shining above their heads. Eventually, the rogue at the front lifted his tail for everyone to stop.

"I will be taking you to Cassius now. You will be respectful, lest we rip your fur off!" His tone was tight, his eyes filled with malice as he turned to glare at the Clan cats.

Elkleap dipped his head, "we will show him the upmost respect," he agreed. With a curt nod, the rogue turned and led them into a small oasis.

The clearing was ringed with bushes, a few saplings growing near the far end. A thin, bubbling stream stretched across the left. The bank was pockmarked with paw prints, showing just how many cats had stopped to take a drink.

As the other rogues pushed them from behind, they were herded even further into the center of the clearing.

Frostfeather gazed in astonishment at how organized the rogues

were. She could see curious eyes peeking at her from the depths of the shrubs. Some cats were laying in the open, their ears standing alert as they watched the strangers enter their home.

"Stay here," the rogue hissed as he turned and trotted towards a massive rotting log near the side of the stream.

"These rogues act like a Clan," Pineheart whispered into Frostfeather's ear. She flicked her tail, not wanting to speak incase one of the rogues heard her.

Brokensong turned to Pineheart, her ears flat to her head, "let's hope they have the same values as Clan cats," she whispered.

After a couple heartbeats, the rogue reappeared with a massive gray and white tabby on his tail. The burly tom shook out his long fur as he came to confront the newcomers.

"My name is Cassius. What are you doing on my land?" he meowed simply. Frostfeather felt her mouth drop open as she stared at his sheer size. He was easily twice the size of Elkleap, his paws the size of the boulders.

"We were just looking for our apprentice, Lionpaw. I think your... friends may have taken her," Elkleap meowed tactfully.

"Ahh, the russet she-cat. Yes, she is here," Cassius grunted, "but you will not be having her back. I've claimed her as a part of my harem."

"What does that mean? Of course she will be coming with us!" Sootsplash hissed.

At the sound of his voice, Lionpaw's head poked from the safety of a nearby clump of grasses.

"Sootsplash!" she cried.

Meadowshine's breath caught in her throat as she stepped closer to her mate. "Please, can't we just take her with us? We've had enough hardship lately. I don't want to leave my daughter behind."

"Hmm..." Cassius narrowed his eyes, staring hard at Meadowshine's fluffy tortoiseshell coat.

"Fine. You may have Lionpaw back. But only if you take her place."

Frostfeather gasped, feeling outrage spark inside her. "No! You can not have either of them," Elkleap snarled, "they are not your property!"

"Well I guess you're just going to have to take her from me," Cassius growled. In response, the other rogues got to their paws and started slinking forward.

Frostfeather's pelt crawled with fear as she looked at their lean, well groomed pelts. These cats were definitely going to put up a fight.

Elkleap lashed his tail, glaring intensely at the massive tom. "IceClan, attack!"

At his yowl, Sootsplash instantly sprang towards the grasses where Lionpaw was hiding. Meadowshine followed, turning to claw at the faces of any rogues who came near.

Frostfeather was pushed over by a brown tabby, his teeth bared as he lunged forward to bite her chest.

Pineheart dove towards him, pushing him off his sister and into the dirt. As he tried to recover his footing, Pineheart yowled and scored his claws down the rogue's spine.

Elkleap had Cassius pinned, his brown and black pelt spiked with fury as he bit down hard on the lead rogue's shoulder. Brokensong was holding her own against a pair of silver pelted toms.

But they wouldn't be winning for long. More rogues were advancing from the edges of the clearing, their claws unsheathed as they raced into battle.

Shrieking erupted from the patch of grasses as Sootsplash reappeared with Lionpaw at his side. Two other small cats raced after them, their pelts spiked with terror as more rogues swarmed after them.

Meadowshine fled after her mate, her pelt dripping with blood. Elkleap turned his attention from Cassius to see his Clanmates racing towards the edge of the clearing.

"IceClan, retreat!" He yowled. Frostfeather started to run in the direction that Sootsplash had disappeared, Pineheart close behind her.

Elkleap leapt off of the thick furred gray and white tom, ripping out clumps of fur as he pushed off. Brokensong ducked and slid under the outstretched paws of the twin toms, pelting after her Clanmates.

The rogues weren't going to give up so easily. Frostfeather could hear their snarls as they chased after their prey. "How are we going to lose them?!" Frostfeather cried.

"We just need to reach the fish hatchery and we are in the clear!" an unfamiliar voice called from a few foxlengths ahead.

Frostfeather didn't have time to question the stranger. She could hear the rogues' frenzied pawsteps as they crashed through the field behind them.

"Stop! You can't escape!" Cassius's voice shouted across the open air.

Frostfeather could feel the sun beating down on her white fur as she ran. She didn't think they'd ever escape, running endlessly into nowhere.

But finally, they approached a towering wooden structure. It almost looked like a cluster of tall, leafless trees arranged into some sort of camp wall.

"We made it!" the strange voice howled.

Frostfeather dared to glance back, delighted to see the rogues had stopped several yards behind them.

The group slowed, coming to stop beside the wooden facade. Frostfeather could feel her sides heaving as she fought for breath.

Brokensong trotted over and leaned in close, sniffing Frostfeather's

bites and scratches from the skirmish. "Just give your wounds a good lick. There shouldn't be any infection," she meowed after a moment.

"Thanks Brokensong," she murmured as she sat and began to clean her scratches. Brokensong started to walk around the others, making sure no one had any risky injuries.

After a couple more minutes, everyone had finally caught their breath. Sootsplash and Meadowshine were hovering over Lionpaw, nuzzling her all over.

"I never want to lose you again!" Meadowshine snapped, a purr throbbing in her chest.

Elkleap cleared his throat, catching everyone's attention. "I'm glad we were able to rescue Lionpaw," he began, "but it seems we have also rescued two other young cats."

Everyone turned to look at the strangers, a small gray pelted tom and a dusky silver and white she-cat.

They met the gazes of the Clan cats bravely, their tails waving behind them. "My name is Blue, and this is Drizzle," the gray tom meowed happily, "we are members of the Dockside Cats."

Chapter Twenty

The Clan cats asked the young Dock cats questions, one by one.

"Are the Dockside cats friendly?" Elkleap asked seriously.

"Oh, yes! Everyone is so kind and nice," Drizzle purred.

"Why are you called Dockside cats?" Meadowshine mewed.

"We live on the docks, at the edge of the water," Blue explained, "it's a really great place to live."

"We should probably escort you back. I'm sure those rogues would love a chance to snatch you both up again," Elkleap observed.

"They usually don't ever come past this fish hatchery. But my mother, Juniper, was showing us the field just over there when they attacked us!" Blue exclaimed.

"Did we leave Juniper back with the rogues?" Brokensong gasped.

Drizzle dropped her gaze as Blue continued, "no, the rogues killed her."

"Oh, I am sorry," Brokensong murmured.

"Well we can take you back to your group. I'm sure they'd be happy to know you're both safe," Elkleap meowed kindly.

"Yeah, I'm sure my dad is worried sick," Blue mewed sadly. Brokensong stepped closer, her careful gaze combing over his body.

"I should tend to your paw before we leave. It looks as though you've wrenched out some of your claws," she insisted.

"What are you going to put on my paw?" He asked warily.

"I'll just chew up some marigold to apply and then wrap it in

cobweb," she purred, "no big deal."

His eyes widened with curiosity, "what is the marigold for?" he asked.

"The marigold will help keep the infection away," she explained kindly.

"Yeah, Brokensong will fix you up! She's been healing our Clan for as long as I can remember!" Frostfeather purred.

"Oh, we don't have a healer at the docks. We just know basic techniques for if we get sick or injured," Drizzle mewed in awe, "I know one of our group mates died awhile ago from an infection."

"But Brokensong will fix me!" Blue trilled, his tail waving happily behind him.

"I'll need someone to go and find me some marigold and cobwebs," Brokensong meowed, turning to the others.

"I'm sure I can find some," Meadowshine offered, "marigold has the big, poofy yellow flowers, right?"

Brokensong nodded, "and cobweb should be relatively easy to find," she meowed.

"Would you want to come help me, Lionpaw?" Meadowshine asked gently.

The young she-cat shook her head, pressing close to Drizzle, "no I want to stay here with them!" she protested.

"That's fine you can stay here with your new friends," Sootsplash purred, "I'll help your mother with the herbs."

Sootsplash and Meadowshine stood and quickly trotted away towards some bushes along the edge of the wooden structure.

"So which way is the docks?" Elkleap asked as he sat beside Frostfeather and Pineheart.

Blue and Drizzle turned their young faces toward him, "its toward the sunset," the squeaked in unison.

Frostfeather exchanged a glance with Pineheart, butterflies fluttering in her stomach. *Maybe our paths were destined to cross,* she thought excitedly.

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After a short while, Meadowshine and Sootsplash reappeared with a thick wad of cobwebs and marigold. Brokensong quickly chewed up the stalks and leaves, hastily applying the poultice to Blue's paw.

After binding it with cobweb, she sat back to admire her handywork. "We should be all set to head out then," she meowed.

Pineheart looked up at the sun, still hanging high in the sky. "Drizzle, you can take the lead with me," Elkleap purred to the white and gray she-cat.

With an excited bounce, she quickly jumped up and hovered at Elkleap's shoulder. Lionpaw passed up to their side, her tail flicking nervously. "Can I walk up here too?" she asked hopefully.

"Of course! I'm sure Drizzle would love your company," Elkleap purred. Lionpaw nuzzled the she-cat happily, her eyes shining. Drizzle returned the gesture, her tail kinking high over her back.

"I'm sure Lionpaw is happy to have some cats around her age to be with," Frostfeather whispered into Pineheart's ear. He nodded, a purr rumbling in his chest.

"It will do her good to have some friends for a bit," he agreed.

Finally, the group set off towards the direction of the sunset. The horizon was completely barren of trees, but a strong tang of salt bathed the air. "It won't be too long before we get there," Drizzle mewed from the front of the group.

"Do you have many other friends back with your group?" Lionpaw asked excitedly as she batted at Drizzle's tailtip.
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"Not really. Blue and I are the youngest cats in the group," she meowed as she turned and reared up to knock Lionpaw over.

"If you two are just going to play, I'll have Blue help me lead," Elkleap scolded gently.

Pineheart glanced at the small silver tom, taking note of his hobbling pace. Brokensong hovered at his shoulder, keeping her tail draped over his back.

"No, I'll be good," Drizzle promised as she turned and sped back to Elkleap's flank. With a huff, Lionpaw also raced back to his side but was smart enough to behave herself.

The group travelled slowly across the grassy landscape, keeping watch for any unexpected strangers. Eventually, they neared something Elkleap could recognize.

"This smells like a border marker," he observed as he bent down to sniff a clump of leafy stems.

"Yeah, this is where they mark the boundary, so that Cassius and his goons stay away," Drizzle mewed.

Stepping over the boundary, Drizzle led them onto the Dockside cat's territory. The ground started to lose its coat of grass, replaced by grainy dirt. More wooden structures loomed in the distance.

"Drizzle? Blue?" A wary voice called out from the distance.

"That's Stone!" Drizzle squeaked happily, bounding away towards the source of the voice. The Clan cats followed more slowly with Blue still limping along beside Brokensong.

After a few moments, they approached Drizzle and the solid gray she-cat named Stone. "What are these trespassers doing here?" Stone asked seriously, a trace of hostility in her voice.

"They saved us from Cassius!" Drizzle purred, "they were bringing us back to make sure we'd be safe!"

Stone turned to the Clan cats and dipped her head. Blue hobbled

forward to touch noses with Stone. "Thank you, for bringing our young ones home safe," she purred.

"It was no problem. Cassius's group seemed like a troublesome bunch. I would have hated to see him capture them again," Elkleap meowed as he stepped forward to speak.

"Was Juniper with you?" Stone asked, turning to Blue and Drizzle.

"No..." Blue mumbled, "Cassius killed her."

"I see..." Stone echoed, her shoulders sagging, "we should return home so we can tell your father."

"Can they come with us?" Blue asked Stone desperately.

"I'm sure Cairn wouldn't mind some visitors," Stone mewed, "they can come with us."

"We would all appreciate a nice rest before we set off again," Elkleap purred as the rest of his group gathered around him.

"Well follow me!" Stone mewed as she bounded off towards the sound of screeching birds and water crashing against the shore.

"This place seems weird," Pineheart mumbled as they passed more of the strange buildings and trotted over hard stone pathways.

"Yes, it is weird," Frostfeather agreed, "but I think we are almost to our new home!"

Stone led them along numerous walking paths, down alleys and tiny dirt roads. Suddenly, a heavily muscled brown and white tabby stepped out of the shadows to greet her.

"Stone, I can smell that you've brought strangers," he growled, "what are they doing here?"

"You can smell the scent of strangers, but not of your son?" she teased, "these strangers saved Blue and Drizzle from Cassius's bunch!"

Pineheart met the powerful tom's gaze for several heartbeats. "You met Cassius?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes, he stole our young she-cat, Lionpaw," Elkleap meowed. The brown tabby turned to look at Lionpaw, who shrunk back to cower behind Meadowshine's haunches.

"I am greatful that you were able to rescue Blue and Drizzle," he meowed, "please join me in our camp. I'm sure the others would love to hear what hardships you have faced."

"Thank you," Elkleap purred as the tom turned to lead the way down a dark alley. The Clan cats bunched closer together as they followed. Pineheart took one last glance down the tight passage before the shadows swallowed his black pelt from sight.

Chapter Twenty-One

Frostfeather felt her whiskers quivering nervously as they padded, blind, through the dense shadows. She bumped into the cat ahead of her, from the scent it had to be Meadowshine.

"Sorry," she mumbled, feeling Pineheart's nose brush her tail from behind.

A flash of light shone at the end of the alleyway. Frostfeather could see Elkleap's broad shoulders as he stepped into the open. Loud, happy voices erupted as the Clan cats walked into view. Frostfeather gazed about in wonder at all the cats gathered around her.

I haven't seen so many cats since we were back in IceClan territory, she marveled. On all sides of the open space, tall rock walls stretched into the sky. Boxes and shining garbage bins lined the walls, some stacked so precariously they seemed they would topple at any moment.

The ground was scuffed from countless moons of activity. The air was rich with the smell of the Dockside Cats.

"My friends, come meet our new guests!" The muscular brown tabby called out loudly as he led the Clan cats into the open.

Frostfeather stepped back as elated, friendly faces pressed forward to greet her. "This group of wandering cats challenged Cassius! They saved Drizzle and Blue from the likes of his tyranny," he yowled, "let us feast in their honor!"

Stone had reappeared at her side, carrying a fish the likes she had never seen. "Thank you for saving our group mates," she murmured as she set the fish down at Frostfeather's paws.

More cats stepped forward, each carrying a massive specimen of prey. Elkleap turned to the brown tabby, a purr throbbing in his

chest.

"You will never know how much we appreciate this. We've been traveling so long. It feels like days since we've had full bellies," he meowed warmly.

"The pleasure is all mine," the tom purred, "for as long as I may breathe, you are welcome on these docks."

The Clan cats started to tuck into their prey, their tails swishing happily behind them. Lionpaw seemed thrilled to have an entire pigeon to herself. While Brokensong slowly picked over her plump pheasant.

"My name is Cairn," the brown tabby introduced himself. Elkleap licked the last scraps of rabbit from his jaws, taking a breath before responding.

"My name is Elkleap. We are all IceClan warriors," he began. He nodded towards Brokensong, who looked up with her good eye shining. "This is our medicine cat, Brokensong," he meowed.

"We do not know what warriors or medicine cats are," Cairn mumbled.

A dazzling orange she-cat stepped forward from the other Dockside cats. She flicked her tail at Cairn's shoulder, her whiskers twitching mischievously.

"I'm sure you could guess that their medicine cat is a healer of sorts," she teased, "you're not that daft."

He snorted, narrowing his yellow eyes, "of course I knew that!" he grumbled.

The fiery she-cat stepped closer to Elkleap, her eyes burning like hot coals. "My name is Sun'ka," she purred.

Frostfeather waited for Elkleap to continue introducing the others, but he seemed frozen with shock. His voice stuttered as he attempted to continue, "th.... this is Lionpaw," he meowed, pointing his tail towards the russet apprentice. "She is the daughter of

Sootsplash and Meadowshine."

Sootsplash dipped his head while Meadowshine waved her tail in greeting. "You all have such fascinating names," Cairn commented kindly.

Blue stumbled forward, bumping into Sun'ka. She licked the top of his head, bending her paw forward to wrap around him. "Blue is my younger brother," she mewed, "it seems like he's always getting into trouble."

Cairn bumped Sun'ka with an outstretched paw, an amused expression across his face. "Yes, *both* of my kits seem to always get into trouble," he grunted.

Frostfeather took a couple steps closer, dipping her head to Cairn and Sun'ka. "My name is Frostfeather. The black tom is my brother, Pineheart."

"Have there always been so few of you?" Sun'ka asked boldly.

"No, we used to have many Clanmates," Frostfeather explained, "but we had to leave them to find a new home."

"Why would you leave them? I'm sure they could have came with you?" Blue squeaked, his eyes as big as moons as he listened to Frostfeather continue.

"They all got.. infected. It was a terrible sickness, one that could not be cured," she mewed quietly.

"That's certainly troubling," Cairn mumbled, "I'm sure it wasn't an easy decision to leave them behind. But all that matters is that you're here now!"

Frostfeather perked her ears, "Yeah, you're right," she purred.

"You are all welcome to relax and build up your energy," Cairn meowed loudly to the Clan cats. Elkleap was still staring, dumbfounded, at Sun'ka. Lionpaw was eagerly hopping towards Drizzle, who was laying near a tumbledown heap of cardboard boxes.

One of the Dockside cats approached Sootsplash and Meadowshine, his expression light and carefree. "My name's Sparrow! If you'd like a nest, I can show you to some open spaces in our den."

Stone was padding back up to Frostfeather, her tail waving in the air. "You and Pineheart can come rest with me if you'd like. There's two spare nests in my den."

"Sure!" she purred, jumping up to follow the silver and orange tabby. Pineheart was right behind, his black pelt rippling uncomfortably. But this seemed to be utter paradise, there really wasn't any reason for Pineheart to doubt their safety.

As soon as they curled in the soft moss of Stone's den, they fell into a cozy slumber.

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Later that night, Frostfeather was fidgeting like a leaf caught in the breeze. She couldn't sleep any longer. She could feel the tug in her paws, urging her to wander from this strange place.

She stood quietly, not wanting to wake Pineheart or Stone. Thankfully, they did not stir as she slid from the safety of the den and out into the center of the Dockside camp. Without a moment to spare, she bounded across the open space and into the pitch black passageway from which they had entered.

The salty tang of the air on her tongue was odd, but refreshing. Reaching the end of the alley, she took a moment to catch her breath. She was still surrounded by tall stone walls.

Turning to her right, she padded down the path beside the stone wall. After several heartbeats, a gust of wind buffeted her whiskers. Narrowing her eyes, she pushed out into the open.

Gasping, she stared at the scene ahead of her. A wooden path extended out for several fox lengths but then ended abruptly at an endless mass of water. It stretched into the distance, as far as she could see. Above her head, the stars shined with the intensity of the sun.
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She raised her muzzle, casting her gaze to the moon that hung so carelessly in the black sky.a soft mew sounded behind her. "What are you doing out here?"

Frostfeather looked over her shoulder, relieved to find it was just Blue. "I just needed some air," she meowed softly.

"You should get plenty here. The wind blows the strongest over the sea," he purred.

The sea, so this is the sea. She looked back down to the heaving water, astounded to find that shimmering silver paw prints were appearing across the surface. They were receding, heading straight across the waves towards the distant horizon.

"Wow," Blue gasped as he stepped forward to stand beside Frostfeather. "I've never seen that before," he marveled.

"Can you see the paw prints?" she asked seriously.

"Yeah, and I can hear really faint voices. They are saying that they are almost there... almost home," he whispered.

Frostfeather's heart slammed in her chest. She turned to stare at the water once more, watching as the paw prints started to fade from view.

"We should probably return to our nests now," Frostfeather meowed after several heartbeats.

"You feel better now?" Blue asked simply.

"Yes, much better," she purred. Blue flicked his tail as he turned and started to pad back down the path beside the wall. She hesitated before following, taking one last look at the sea.

We're almost there, she thought excitedly.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The next morning was serene and peaceful. Pineheart had joined some of the Dockside cats in the middle of their camp to bask in the sunlight. Even though the walls that surrounded them were taller than trees, the sun still managed to shine down near the middle of the day.

As he was just preparing to close his eyes, he hear Cairn's voice as he approached. "Hello, Pineheart. Are you feeling rested today?" he asked kindly.

The sun had been warming his black pelt for so long, he almost didn't want to move. "Oh yes, it's so nice to relax," Pineheart purred.

"Your Clanmates also seem to finally be relaxing," Cairn commented. Pineheart glanced across the clearing to where he had last seen Brokensong. She was near one of the surrounding walls, rolling on her back in a sparse patch of grasses.

"It's been a good while before we've had the chance to just unwind," Pineheart explained, "we've faced so much hardship since we left."

"You know, I haven't heard the story yet of what made you leave. Would you mind coming with me to my den? We can have some privacy," Cairn meowed.

Inwardly, Pineheart wanted to say no. It was so far behind them now, he really didn't want to remember the events that had brought them here. But the kind nature of Cairn's voice, the caring glow in his eyes; Pineheart finally gave in. "Sure."

He followed the gentle leader back to his den; a shaggy elderberry bush that sprouted from a crack in the stone wall. As the leaves closed around them, Pineheart was pleased to find how spacious the bush was underneath.

Cairn turned towards his nest, sweeping his tail along the earthen

floor below him. "I can spare some moss from my nest if you'd like to make yourself comfortable," Cairn offered.

"I'll be ok to stand," Pineheart insisted, "I wouldn't want you to ruin your nest."

"It's no bother to me," he chuckled, "but if you are sure... go ahead with the story of your journey."

Pineheart took a deep shuddering breath. An image of Blizzardstar stained his thoughts. "My father, Blizzardstar, was leader of our Clan," he began slowly.

"We had lived on our territory for many generations. We always faced hardship, but that's the life of a warrior. Nothing ever seemed impossible, especially with Blizzardstar to lead us."

He thought back to the morning he had spent with the elders in their den. He remembered asking Wildflight if his father really was as great as he used to be. His heart twisted with regret.

"I was having doubts that my father was still as strong to lead our Clan. He seemed to be too focused on taking care of me and Frostfeather."

Cairn raised his tail, the tip flicking faintly. "Didn't you have a mother to help him take care of you?" he asked.

"No, our mother died when we were newborns. Another she-cat, Foxstreak, helped to raise us. But she was never as protective as Blizzardstar was," he explained.

"Ah, I see. So after the death of your mother, Blizzardstar must have wanted to assure that you two would grow up well protected," Cairn spoke, "it's hard to lose a loved one."

"You didn't seem too upset that Juniper had been killed," Pineheart pointed out boldly.

Cairn laughed, his shoulders bobbing, "Of course I was upset," he mewed, "but death is a part of life. Juniper was such a kind, caring mate. She mothered Sun'ka and Blue as well as any mother could."

Pineheart nodded, "I wish I could feel the way you do. Even though life was peaceful, a sickness took hold of one of our elders. It was horrible. He turned savage out of nowhere and killed one of our apprentices!"

Cairn narrowed his eyes, "that sounds like a sickness that plagued these lands long ago. My mother had told me of a sickness that would turn any living thing into a rage induced monster. She called it rabies."

"That was probably it," Pineheart murmured, "after I killed the elder, I learned that Frostfeather was having dreams from our ancestors. She told Blizzardstar that we had to leave the forest."

"You killed the elder?" Cairn asked seriously, "that must have been hard. I'm sure you would have rather he live."

"Yes, I really didn't want to kill him," he said, "but after he killed Shimmerpaw I couldn't let him endanger anyone else."

"I would assume that Blizzardstar headed Frostfeather's warning, then. That's why you're here," Cairn guessed.

"Well, he didn't believe her at first. He wanted to go to the Fire Stone to share dreams with StarClan," Pineheart corrected him.

"What is StarClan?" Cairn couldn't help but interrupt.

"StarClan are our ancestors," Pineheart explained, "whenever a Clan cat dies, they go to StarClan where they can watch over us and help guide us when things get difficult."

"That sounds similar to what we believe," Cairn said, "when one of us passes, we are buried next to the Heart of the Sky. When we visit it in the Den of the Sky, we can hear the voices of our ancestors."

The Heart of the Sky, Pineheart thought in awe. "I bet Brokensong would love to see that," he meowed.

"Your medicine cat? Maybe I'll have to take her there sometime," he wondered aloud.

"Well, after Blizzardstar left with Frostfeather and Brokensong to go to the Fire Stone, a lone wolf attacked the camp. It was so angry and vicious, it killed so many of my Clanmates. Many that weren't killed, had been bitten or scratched," he continued, "after their meeting with StarClan, Blizzardstar knew that the wolf had brought this sickness into our camp."

He took a slow breath before carrying on. "He told us to leave. That he would carry on watching over them until it was their time to join StarClan. He must not have been alive for long. Frostfeather saw him and the other IceClan cats in a vision," his voice cracked with sadness as he mentioned his father.

"I'm sure your journey has not been easy," Cairn meowed slowly, "I can see in your eyes just how much you have suffered."

"I just don't want anyone else to die," Pineheart whimpered.

"You have no reason to worry," Cairn purred, "IceClan are safe here. We will not let anything happen to you."

Pineheart relaxed, feeling reassured by Cairn's calming voice. "Thank you," Pineheart mumbled.

Cairn nodded, "you are free to leave," he meowed.

With a hasty farewell, Pineheart turned and slid out from around the branches of the elderberry bush. He noticed Elkleap padding in through the entrance alleyway, close beside the orange body of Sun'ka.

The pure delight on the brown and black tom's face was enough to lift Pineheart's spirits. *It looks like we are all happy here, maybe this is where we belong.*

Chapter Twenty-Three

Several days had passed while the Clan cats relaxed in the Dockside camp. Elkleap continued to volunteer for patrols while his friends rested. Even now, he was out with Sun'ka and Sparrow hunting.

Frostfeather was preparing to leave with her own patrol. Stone and Lily had promised to let her join them on an aggression patrol. They had explained to her that they would walk to their shared borders and ward off any trespassers.

"If they're a part of a Cassius's group, they mean trouble," Stone muttered as she started to lead the patrol out through the narrow tunnel heading out of camp.

Frostfeather took a short gulp of breath before passing into the shadow of the alleyway. Her fur felt unusually cold in its shade.

They continued out of the passage and turned inland, towards the trees. Frostfeather shook out her pelt, happy to be in the open once more.

Their border with Cassius seemed deserted. Not even a wisp of stray scent dared to cross. "Maybe he learned his lesson!" Lily growled.

Frostfeather glanced behind them, to the fish hatchery they had passed. As Stone and Lily started to sniff through the undergrowth near the border, she almost thought she could smell Cassius's powerful scent.

"It's time we were going. We still need to check the border with the Dockworkers," Lily called. Frostfeather's attention snapped back to her surroundings. Turning, she noticed the two she-cats had already started to leave her behind.

She hurried to catch up, her ears flat as she bolted through the grass back towards the towering buildings of the Docks. Stone had halted a few paces ahead, waiting for her to catch up.

Her solid gray fur rippled from the passing breeze. "It's a little weird near the docks, but don't worry. None of the workers will hurt you," she purred as she padded close to Frostfeather's side.

"If you say so.." she mumbled uncertainly. *I don't know what workers are*, she thought, *I wonder what they look like.*

The pair followed Lily's scent as they travelled closer and closer to the docks. White birds with loud, harsh cries soared overhead. "This is usually where we come to find food, too," Stone mewed as they walked out onto the hard wooden surface of the dock.

The ocean stretched away on the horizon, heaving with the force of its waves. Along the expanse of the docks, tall creatures were walking from building-to-building.

Frostfeather instantly bristled at the sight of them. They tottered on their back legs, their forelegs dangling at their sides. They were devoid of fur, except for small patches directly on top of their heads.

"They sure do look funny, don't they?" Lily purred as they padded closer to the orange tabby she-cat. Hovering beneath a small wooden, den like structure, she peeked around the corner as a Dockworker started to step towards them.

"Why are we sneaking if these workers won't hurt us?" Frostfeather asked seriously. Her heart thudded as the Dockworker's feet thudded on the wooden planks only a few rabbit hops away.

"Well, usually when they see us they want to pet us," Stone confessed, "we typically let them. But lately they've been trying to chase us away. We think it's because Olive has been stealing their fish."

"She said that she stopped, though," Lily mewed, "hopefully that means they'll stop chasing us."

Surprisingly, a hairless pink face loomed over them from the opposite side of wooden bench. It shouted something, but it certainly didn't sound friendly.

"Uh, oh... time to go!" Stone squealed, turning and bolting down the nearest pitch black alleyway. Lily was right behind, her tail waving wildly as she ran.

Frostfeather was frozen, staring up into the glassy eyes of the Dockworker. It was looking over her, making small clicking noises with its flat mouth.

Her nostrils flared as it reached out an oil slicked forepaw, letting it rest on her pristine ivory fur. The worker cooed, sounding like a queen comforting her kit.

"Don't hurt me," Frostfeather whimpered, feeling its paw move slowly down her spine. When it reached her tail, it pulled its paw back and stood to its full height. She could see its eyes shining as it looked down at her.

The worker turned, shouting out something to some other workers that had started to walk over. She could hear them call back and fourth to each other for a moment before they started to walk away in the other direction.

She waited until their thumping footsteps faded into the distance before racing after Stone and Lily's trail. She followed their scents the whole way back to the Dockside camp, running blind through the dark passageways.

When she entered, the two she-cats were nowhere in sight. Cairn was sitting a few paces away with Pineheart, Elkleap, and Sun'ka sitting in a ragged circle around him.

Noticing her entrance, the brown tabby leader waved her over with his tail. "You are more than welcome to fetch some prey and come join us," he meowed warmly as she approached.

"I'm ok, thank," she puffed, still out of breath.

"What's that smudge? On your back," Pineheart asked curiously, leaning forward to lick the oily streak.

"One of the Dockworkers put its paw on me," she mewed, "it was so odd, I had never seen anything like that before."

"The Dockworker put its paw on you?" Cairn echoed, "it didn't try and chase you?"

"No, it seemed like it was going to at first. But then it just reached out and brushed its paw against me and then walked away," she explained.

"Hmm.. this is interesting," Cairn meowed seriously, "we have been having issues with the workers for some time now. Maybe I should go and share with my ancestors, and ask them if the trouble has passed."

"Oh you're actually going to go and ask their advice for once?" Sun'ka snorted, "I thought you knew everything."

Frostfeather noticed her exchange a humorous glance with Elkleap as he nudged her with his shoulder. "I've never been above seeking guidance from the Heart of the Sky," Cairn grunted.

"When would you want to go?" Pineheart mewed.

"Not until tomorrow evening. Don't worry, I'll be sure to ask Brokensong if she would like to join me," he chuckled.

Frostfeather narrowed her eyes, wondering when her brother had gotten so cozy with Cairn. *It seems like everyone has been getting cozy with the Dockside cats,* she thought as she said a swift goodbye and turned to her den.

Secretly, she was truly wondering if becoming so close with them was a good thing. If StarClan planned on them leaving, it would be so much harder after they've made ties with these strange cats. *But who am I to ruin their happiness*, she thought, *they all deserve it.. for now.*

Chapter Twenty-Four

The next day seemed to drag by as Pineheart waited to go with Cairn to the Heart of the Sky. Brokensong has been delighted when they had asked her that previous night. She would never turn down an experience such as this.

As the sun was starting to set behind the tall stone walls of the dock buildings, Pineheart watched Cairn step from the depths of his den. Brokensong was laying only a few foxlengths away, her paws tucked beneath her chest.

As he padded out, she stood to greet him. "Thank you for allowing me to join you. Maybe I can gain some new knowledge from your ancestors," she purred as she dipped her head.

"It is no problem at all," he assured her, "I'm sure our ancestors will be eager to share with you."

Blue bounced up, his forepaw still wrapped in cobwebs. "Am I coming to?" He asked excitedly.

"No, you're going to help Sun'ka keep watch over the camp," Cairn replied. Blue's whiskers instantly drooped.

"You should be resting your paw anyways," Brokensong mewed as she turned to the young silver tom. "You remember what I told you to put on it, right?"

"Yeah, goldenrod and oak leaves," he purred.

"Good." she grunted, "make sure to give Falcon those juniper berries if he is still complaining of his belly ache later."

Blue nodded, turning and speeding off towards the small den Brokensong had claimed as her own. "We should be heading out now," Cairn mewed as Pineheart finally stood and padded over.

All three of them turned and started to pad towards the alley out of

camp. Pineheart glanced back towards the dens one last time, noticing that almost all of the other cats had already turned in for the night.

My night is only just beginning, he thought excitedly.

The small group entered the passageway, trotting quickly down its length until they came back out to the open. Pineheart relished the tang of the salty sea water on his muzzle. Cairn stopped for a moment, casting his gaze across the heaving waves.

"It's such a clear night. Perfect for sharing dreams with our ancestors," he commented. Pineheart silently agreed. The sky was already turning dark, with tiny speckles of light splashed across the horizon. An enormous full moon hung precariously in the sky above.

After several more heartbeats, Cairn turned and started to lead them along the dock. There were no dockworkers in sight. The usually bustling area practically deserted.

Eventually, another alley came into view. Nestled between two massive buildings, the pitch black opening was quite inconspicuous.

"This is the tunnel to the Den of the Sky. You should stay close behind me," Cairn warned before stepping into the shadows.

Brokensong didn't hesitate as she faded into the darkness behind him. Pineheart's black pelt stood on end as he stared into the alley. He could hear whispers, urging him onward into the dark.

He could hear Cairn's voice ahead, "we will be there shortly. Just stay close behind me."

His voice sounded so far away. In a panic, Pineheart started to run after the lingering scents of Cairn and Brokensong. Thankfully, he slowed before he crashed into the medicine cat's haunches.

"We are almost there," Cairn meowed up ahead. Pineheart squinted, trying to see a break in the dense shadow of the alleyway. Finally, a flash of light appeared at the end of the tunnel.

Pineheart could see Cairn's slender shoulders as he led them into the open. Pineheart couldn't suppress a gasp of astonishment at what he saw. The dock buildings had been arranged to make a large, circular clearing. It was closed around the circumference, except for the alley they had just trudged through.

The ground was mostly grass, but in some spaces the earth shone through the tiny stalks. At the center of the clearing, a massive tree sprouted and reached up with oaken branches towards the sky. It's leaves rustled as a breeze stirred its weakest limbs.

The roots, also equally enormous, broke through the dirt and stretched in all directions. Only near the tips did they disappear into the grass once more. Pineheart stared up at the slick surfaces of the dock buildings, completely devoid of any blemishes, dips, or divets.

"Welcome to the Den of the Sky," Cairn purred.

Brokensong's good eye was stretched wide, completely awestruck at the scene in front of her. Cairn had started to pick his way forward, padding around the patches of dirt that crisscrossed the grass. "Just watch where you step. There's generations of passed on Dockcats under your paws," he mewed, a teasing tone in his voice.

"How do we know where they're at?" Pineheart asked shakily as he took a step forward.

"You don't!" Cairn chuckled, his tail flicking in the air behind him. Pineheart felt Brokensong press close beside him, her sides quivering with excitement.

The pair watched as Cairn jumped up on one of the huge roots, and lay close to the trunk of the tree. "If you'd like to stay on the ground, you can just press your nose to the roots," Cairn offered.

Brokensong leapt forward, extending her neck to sniff the musty bark. "No, I'll come up wit you," she mewed as she reared back on her hind paws. With a short bounce, she came to stand beside him on the jutting root.

Pineheart was perfectly fine staying on the ground. As he grew close, a shadow passed over the moon. The Den of the Sky grew dark, just as black as the alleyways that had led them here.

But his nose was already brushing the gritty bark, plunging him into a deep slumber.

He tried to blink his eyes open, but they were heavy with tiredness. When he finally managed to open them wide, he was surprised to see that he was sitting on the soft tan dirt of the beach.

Cairn and Brokensong were sitting silently beside him, their gazes scanning their bleak surroundings. Behind them, the sand stretched away into the distance. But in front, the ocean spanned across the horizon and disappeared far out of sight.

A thick fog hung above the waves, tainted with the reek of sea fish and salt. "Is this your StarClan?" Brokensong asked quietly.

As if in reply, the fog started to swirl and clear from their view. Surprisingly, a single star studded figure was padding towards them across the water.

Cairn quickly stood and bolted to the shore line to greet the stranger. Pineheart and Brokensong followed more slowly.

"Greetings, my son," the transparent she-cat chimes as she neared, "I see you have brought new faces with you."

"Yes! These are Pineheart and Brokensong," he purred happily, "they are IceClan warriors!"

"Welcome, travelers," the starry she-cat meowed softly. Pineheart almost had to strain to hear her gentle tone.

"We are happy to be here," Brokensong meowed formally as she dipped her head.

"This is my mother, Fable," Cairn explained, "she was the leader of the Dockside Cats before me."

Fable erupted into a deep purr. "I was right to leave the Clan to you

at my time of passing," she insisted, "you know you have served our group well."

Cairn's tail started to puff up, the tip flicking self consciously. "But I know still know when to ask you for help," he grunted.

"So it's help that you are seeking?" she asked seriously.

"I have come to see if IceClan are the answer to our troubles," he began, "they outsmarted Cassius; and even calmed one of the Dockworkers."

Fable was nodding her small, tortoiseshell head as he continued. "Their numbers are so small, I fear if IceClan were to carry on they would eventually perish."

Pineheart shot him a look through narrowed eyes. He wasn't aware that Cairn had thought of them as so... frail.

"I wanted to let them stay," he finished, his stare intense as he waited for his mother's response.

She was looking over Cairn's shoulder, her eyes unfocused. "IceClan are not meant to stay on the docks," she mumbled.

A thick covering of gray clouds started to blanket the sky. "But I can not turn them away when they need help," Cairn grunted.

"Cairn, you are such a free spirit. I have no hopes to change your mind if you've already committed to sheltering these IceClan cats.."

Pineheart looked past Fable, into the ocean. The waves were crashing violently, the water turning a murky crimson shade. He could hear Brokensong gasp beside him as the vision began to unfold.

Fable started to whisper something softly. He stared at her muzzle, hearing her words as clear as birdsong in his head. "Beware the paws that have traveled far, for darkness shall surge in their wake. A cloud will follow to shroud the dock in shadow. Blood will spill blood and waves will clash, washing away what remains."

A crack of thunder pierced the air around them. With a blinding flash, Pineheart furiously blinked his eyes and found himself laying on the grass next to the Heart of the Sky.

He pricked his ears as he heard the rumble of a coming storm. Cairn and Brokensong were getting to their paws atop the root. They both hopped down, their faces unreadable.

"Don't tell anyone what you heard," Cairn grunted as padded past, towards the tiny alleyway.

Pineheart exchanged a baffled look with Brokensong before trudging after him. They both had the same question burned in their minds. *What just happened?*

Chapter Twenty-Five

Dawn and already come and gone, but it was impossible to tell when the Sky was shrouded with storm clouds. Pineheart could tell that Cairn was spooked. His brown pelt was spiked, his tail twitching low to the ground behind him.

"I can speak with Elkleap about our departure," Brokensong offered as she trotted close to his side, "I would hate for us to bring trouble to your group."

"No!" Cairn snapped, his voice harsh with anger, "IceClan *will* be welcomed on the docks. Fable is as clueless as a sparrow!"

Pineheart continued to follow obediently, trailing down the alley toward camp. "Our ancestors know more than we do," Brokensong warned, a soft threat in her voice.

"Fable can make decisions for the dead. Only I can govern the living," he growled, swinging his head over to glare at Brokensong.

She quickly nodded, her tail curling protectively around her side. Pineheart had not yet seen Cairn's angry side. He wasn't sure how to feel about any of this.

The three of them padded into camp, where the Dockcats were already becoming active for the day.

Sun'ka was sitting at the head of a large group of cats, most likely organizing the hunting and border aggression patrols. Elkleap hovered at her side, his face beaming with happiness as her ginger tail caressed his cheek.

Beside him was Jewel, a weathered white and silver she-cat. Adjacent to her, was Falcon and Stone. To Sun'ka's other side was Olive, Smog, and Raven, who were huddled close to chatter while Sun'ka doled out the daily duties. Their black pelts melded together like a shadow hovering in the grass.

Cairn had already vanished, presumably to his den. Brokensong was also padding away towards her side of the clearing where Blue was waiting for her. Pineheart sighed deeply, wondering what he should do.

Turning his attention to the back of the clearing, he noticed Frostfeather relaxing with Meadowshine, Lionpaw, and Drizzle. *Maybe I can talk to Frostfeather about what happened*, he thought hopefully as he started walking towards them.

"Hi, Pineheart," Frostfeather mewed as he approached.

Drizzle bounced towards him, tumbling under his paws. Lionpaw, the larger of the two younger cats, came bounding after her. "Drizzle, I don't think Pineheart wants you under his feet," Lionpaw purred.

Dramatically, Pineheart flopped down onto his side and let out a wail. "Oh, Drizzle! You've defeated me.." his voice grew quiet and trailed off.

Happily content, Drizzle turned away with her tail waving high in the air. Frostfeather got to her paws and padded closer to Pineheart's side. He let his head rest on the ground, feeling all his tiredness wash back over him.

Frostfeather leaned down and brought her muzzle close to his ear. "How was your trip?" she whispered.

He thought back to what had happened, how bizarre it had all seemed. He wasn't sure what Fable's warning would mean for the Clan cats. "It was... weird," he mumbled.

He closed his eyes, inwardly wishing that he could go to sleep and forget all about what happened. "You can go lay in your nest if you'd like to rest. I'm sure no one would mind if you slept in for a bit," Meadowshine offered kindly.

Pineheart flicked open his eyes, "yeah, I guess I should," he puffed. After a short moment, he stood and plodded slowly into the comfort of their den.

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Frostfeather watched him slink away, his black fur swallowed by the darkness of the cardboard box. Questions whirled like a hurricane in her head. *What happened at that tree,* she thought in frustration.

"When is Sootsplash coming back?" Lionpaw asked. Frostfeather turned her attention back to her companions. Lionpaw had turned to look at her mother, her tail kinked over her spine.

"He left with Sparrow and Lily only a little while ago. Aren't you having fun with just us?" Meadowshine purred.

Drizzle crouched low, wiggling her haunches. With a loud *mrrrow* she leapt on top of Lionpaw and bowled her over. Meadowshine watched them play, purring with pleasure.

But Frostfeather wasn't paying them much attention. She had turned to look at Brokensong's makeshift den, staring into the darkness that had consumed her.

"I'll be back," Frostfeather grunted hastily as she jumped up to her paws and started trotting across the camp. She could hear two sets of paw steps rustling inside the boxes as she came near.

"Why are you acting so weird?" Blue's distressed voice wafted out of the entrance.

Frostfeather stepped inside, squinting to see Brokensong's brown and black pelt in the shadows.

"You don't have to leave," Blue whimpered, "Cairn said you could all stay!"

"Are we leaving?" Frostfeather asked, making Brokensong completely stop what she was doing. She turned, exposing her tidy line of leaf wrapped herbs she had been making.

"We need to carry on with our journey, now that we are all strong and well fed," Brokensong reasoned, "we aren't meant to stay here."
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"I wasn't saying that we are mean to stay here," Frostfeather mewed, "but it would be foolish to leave when we have finally found somewhere safe. If Cairn isn't pushing us out, I don't see why we shouldn't stay."

Blue was staring desperately up at Brokensong. "Please don't leave," he begged softly.

The medicine cat closed her one good eye and took a deep breath. Leaning down, she touched her nose to Blue's forehead. "We will stay, for now," she sighed, "but it'd be better for everyone if we left sooner rather than later."

Blue brushed his muzzle against her chin, a purr rumbling in his chest. "Do you think you could go and fetch me some more watermint?" Brokensong asked him gently. "You remember what it looks like, right?"

"Of course!" Blue chirped before he whirled around and raced from the den.

"I wasn't thinking we would all grow so attached," Brokensong admitted.

"I don't think any of us were," Frostfeather agreed, "they're all so kind and welcoming. It's almost like it's too good to be true."

"Like there's something lurking in the darkness..." Brokensong murmured, her whiskers quivering.

"Did something happen at the tree?" Frostfeather blurted.

Brokensong shuffled her paws, her tail twitching nervously. "Nothing Cairn is too worried about," she mewed simply.

She wanted to ask more questions, but it seemed like Brokensong wasn't intending to give her the answers.

"I'll be going now," Frostfeather mewed. She turned and started to pad out of the folded den entrance.

Glancing around the empty clearing, she figured the patrols had all

left while she was talking with Brokensong. Meadowshine had fallen asleep, stretched out beside Drizzle and Lionpaw. The two young cats were practicing the claw-hold, a simple but effective IceClan battle move.

It's almost like we're a Clan again, she thought wistfully. But she couldn't suppress her strange feeling, that something wasn't right. Brokensong has described it perfectly, like something was lurking in the darkness.

But what would pose a threat to the Dock cats? she wondered. Maybe they *should* leave sooner rather than later. *Maybe StarClan will visit us, and tell us what to do,* she thought hopefully.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It had been several days since the dream at the Heart of the Sky. Pineheart was uncomfortably aware of how long they had been staying here. *We could have been to our new home by now*, he thought sadly.

In the camp, soft rays of sunlight reached down past the stone buildings to dapple the earthen floor. Most of the dock cats were still waking up, stumbling from their dens in a sleep laden stupor.

Cairn was waiting to organize the patrols, sitting tall like a statue only a few rabbit hops away from the camp entrance. His massive form was completely silent, his brown tabby pelt rippling as he turned to scan the clearing.

His eyes met Pineheart and he immediately waved his tail in greeting. Reluctantly, Pineheart padded over to the regal dock cats' leader.

"Good morning," he rumbled. Pineheart stepped closer, coming to sit at Cairn's shoulder. He wrapped his tail tightly around his paws.

"Good morning," Pineheart replied softly.

"It's a fine morning for a... what did Elkleap call it? A border patrol," Cairn meowed slowly.

"Yes, that's what we refer to them as," Pineheart mewed, "but I'm sure it doesn't matter what you call them. Every group is different."

Cairn's tail tip twitched, "but eventually we won't be different," he grunted, "every day, we learn more and more from you all."

Pineheart felt his fur prickle along his spine at Cairn's words. "But your way of life has kept you alive until now. I'm sure you don't need to change it," he insisted.

Cairn shook his head, lowering his muzzle so he could whisper in

Pineheart's ear. "I had another dream last nite. Fable returned, she seemed really upset.."

Pineheart could feel his heartbeat quicken as Cairn continued, "she told me that this day would bring death to my docks. But I can't see how, when we are so much more well protected with you IceClan cats around."

Pineheart could see a vision before him, fleeting but still vivid enough. A surge of blood was rushing towards him, threatening to drown everything in its path. He could hear cats wailing in distress, screeching with the fierceness of battle or in pain from utter defeat.

"We could barely even protect ourselves," Pineheart muttered, "I don't see how we can help you."

Cairn's expression changed as he stared into Pineheart's eyes. He could see determination, but also desperation. Something wasn't right.

Pineheart was about to ask him a question, but just at that moment some of the others were approaching. Elkleap came first, with Sun'ka on his tail.

Behind them, some of the other dock cats were finally coming forward to join their daily patrols. Pineheart could recognize the three black pelted siblings, Olive, Smog, and Raven. Stone and Sparrow were also joining the crowd, eager to get out of camp and stretch their legs.

Cairn cleared his throat, effectively silencing whatever Olive, Smog, and Raven where whispering about. "There will be one hunting patrol. Sun'ka, you will lead. Take Sparrow, Olive, and Smog," he instructed.

"I will be leading the *border* patrol," he purred, "I will be taking Pineheart, Stone, Elkleap, and Raven." The group of cats hastily separated themselves, preparing to leave.

Pineheart looked back towards the dens, hoping to catch Frostfeather's eye. But she was still sleeping. *That's strange,* he

thought to himself before turning and following Cairn into the pitch black alley out of camp.

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Cairn led the patrol down the docks first. It was early, so there were no workers in sight to disturb them. They picked their way across the entire length of the wooden surface, peaking over the side at the water every now and then.

The sun was still low in the sky, the ocean still void of its light. Pineheart squinted at the mist that hovered over the waves. He almost imagined he could see Fable watching him from the haze, but as soon as he had blinked she was gone.

He had to rush to catch up, the patrol had drawn a short bit ahead. The docks came to an end abruptly, short grass taking its place. Here, Cairn turned and started to lead his group inland.

"It seems pretty quiet this morning," Elkleap purred. Right beside him, Raven nodded in agreement.

"Mornings are usually pretty peaceful," the black and white tom mewed.

Pineheart felt Stone's tailtip brush his nose, making him sneeze. He picked up his pace, coming to walk beside her.

The gray she-cat purred as he neared, "Tired of walking in the back by yourself?" she teased.

"Err.. I guess so," he puffed. Stone flicked her tail over his back, a playful gleam in her emerald eyes.

"Be alert!" Cairn called over his shoulder, "I can sent Cassius!"

The others fell silent, their eyes wide as they scanned the grassland for a gray and white pelt. They continued on their path, along the border they shared with the sneaky rogues.

Cairn lifted his muzzle, inhaling the scents on the air. Almost immediately, Cassius slunk out of the long grasses only a few fox
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lengths away.

"I would have thought after all these years you could tell when I am sneaking up on you," the massive gray and white tom snickered darkly.

"You shouldn't be trespassing on my land," Cairn growled, his tail twitching as he turned to face the intruder.

His patrol gathered at his sides, forming a fearsome battle line. In response, Cassius's rogues surged forward from the long grass to come and stand at his flanks.

"This looks bad," Stone whispered.

"But this was once my land," Cassius meowed, "so then I should be allowed to be here too, right?"

Cairn's hackles rose, a growl rumbling in his chest. "You gave up the right to be here when you wouldn't follow my leadership!" he snarled.

The rogues gazes glittered with malice as they stared at the Dockcats, their muscles tense as if poised to strike.

"How could I live under the rule of a negligent brother! You were supposed to be my equal but instead you let your position control you!" Cassius's voice rose to a yowl, his ears flat against his head.

"You were just jealous," Cairn sneered, "Fable knew I was destined to be leader!" At the mention of the dead she-cat, Cassius's eyes darkened.

"And you wonder why I hate you! You get all the love, all the attention! That's why when I had the chance to kill your precious mate, I took it!" He flexed his claws, sinking them into the dirt.

Stone growled beside Pineheart, her fur spiking all over. "Of course, I knew it was you who had killed her," Cairn growled, "who else would be content to kill such a delicate flower?"

His words were harsh, making Pineheart flinch. Their words were

drenched with anger, such intense fury and hatred.

"Ahh, yes. Of course, she was such a *delicate flower*. Isn't it such a shame she had to wither in my shade.." with those words, Cairn yowled in overwhelming rage.

He charged forward, launching himself at the rogue leader. The rest of the Dockcats, along with Pineheart and Elkleap, also rushed forward to intercept the rogues.

Pineheart crashed into a well muscled, rusty orange tabby. Without hesitation, he reared back and slashed his claws down the rogue's flank. Beside him, screeches rang out as the others clashed in battle.

The rogue turned, his lips drawn back in a snarl as lunged and snapped his jaws down onto Pineheart's shoulder. He yowled in pain, feeling the rogue's teeth piercing his skin.

Twisting, he tried to knock the orange tabby onto its side. With a grunt, the rogue loosened his grip just enough for Pineheart to push forward and throw him onto the ground.

He raked his claws down the rogue's exposed belly fur. The intruder yowled as blood started to spring from its wounds. As it jumped up, it quickly turned and fled back towards the tall grass.

Pineheart turned to see how his companions were managing against the remaining rogues. Stone was gripped in a close combat with a slippery, dirt brown tom. Elkleap tumbled a few rabbit hops away with two smaller rogues, while Raven was facing off with a calico.

Pineheart raced towards Elkleap, intending to catch one of his enemies by surprise. But as he neared, he heard Cairn yowl in pain.

He whirled back around, shocked to see that Cassius had Cairn pinned to the ground. All the other Dockcats were too caught up in battle, only Pineheart could do anything to stop him.

He crouched low, ready to launch himself at the gray and white rogue. But before he had the chance, the rogue he had been fighting reappeared from the shadows and leapt onto his back. The breath flew out of him as he was pushed into the ground.

"You don't have to do this," Cairn growled, staring up into Cassius's blazing eyes.

"But I do. For everything you have put me through. I will take over the docks, and kill every last one of those Clan cats you've been harboring," Cassius snarled.

"Don't think about trying to be a hero again," the orange rogue grunted in Pineheart's ear. He tensed his muscles, but could feel the rogue sink his claws deeper into his skin.

"The Clan cats haven't done anything wrong," Cairn meowed, "they deserve to be here, where they can live safely."

"But I don't?!" Cassius yowled. He bared his teeth and quickly bent down, sinking his fangs into Cairn's throat.

Pineheart felt his body go numb as he watched Cassius stand and back away from Cairn's body. "It's time to leave," Cassius grunted.

The rogues jumped away from their tussles, padding back towards their leader's side. Pineheart sighed with relief as the orange tabby finally stepped away to join his group.

Cassius stared at Cairn's body for a few more heartbeats before leading his cats away with a flick of his tail. Elkleap limped towards Cairn, his sides dripped blood from where he had been clawed and bitten.

"He's still alive!" Elkleap meowed with relief, "we have to get him back to camp!"

Pineheart padded to his side, feeling nauseous as he noticed the widening pool of blood beneath Cairn's head. "I don't think he's going to make it back to camp..." Stone murmured as she appeared at Pineheart's other side.

The brown tabby leader's eyes had already closed, his breath coming in fast, shallow gasps. Pineheart glanced over to where Raven was laying, also laying in a pool of his own blood.

"We need to carry them back. Brokensong will do what she can,"

Elkleap meowed.

Stone helped Elkleap get Cairn onto his shoulders, while Pineheart made his way over to Raven's side. To his relief, he was conscious.

"Are you ok to walk?" Pineheart asked as Raven pushed himself into a sitting position. He noticed his chest was slashed open, with blood still seeping from the wound.

"I think so," he meowed weakly, coming to stand on wobbly paws. Pineheart let him lean against his flank as the four of them started the painfully slow walk back to camp.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Frostfeather stretched her legs as she finally got up and started to leave the den for the day. The sun was slowly approaching the center of the sky, showing just how much time had truly passed.

Jewel, the white and silver she-cat, was resting near the other side of the camp. Falcon, a dusty brown tom, was stretched out beside her. Frostfeather could hear Blue, meowing loudly inside Brokensong's den. Drizzle was hovering by the den entrance, her white and gray fur spiked with excitement.

"Come on Blue you said we would go practice our hunting crouch," Drizzle complained.

Frostfeather picked her way across the camp, approaching the apprentice-sized she-cat. Blue's voice drifted out of the entrance, "Brokensong asked me to sort the coltsfoot," he squeaked.

"I don't even know what that is..." Drizzle grumbled, her tail slapping against the bare earth.

Frostfeather gently nudged her with her paw, "I could take you out to practice hunting," she offered kindly.

Drizzle looked up, her light blue eyes shining, "we were supposed to go out with Lionpaw. But Sootsplash and Meadowshine are still asleep, I think she might still be sleeping too."

Frostfeather recalled the previous night, when Meadowshine told Frostfeather that she and Sootsplash would be taking Lionpaw for a walk on the docks. They had wanted to have some alone time, but for what she was not sure.

"Yes, they were awake late last nite," Frostfeather meowed, "it would be best to let them rest."

She was about to suggest they go out and hunt, but she was stopped

before she got the chance. A mournful wail echoed through the alley, into the camp. With it, came the unmistakeable tang of spilt blood.

"Something's wrong," Frostfeather whispered. Brokensong was already padding from the mouth of her den, her expression grave. Frostfeather followed her, with Drizzle right behind.

Elkleap and Stone came charging into camp, a ragged body atop their shoulders. Frostfeather gasped as she realized it was Cairn.

"What happened?" Brokensong demanded as she strode towards them. Elkleap gently rested the leader's body on the ground before answering.

"Cassius jumped us on the border. He was crazed!" Elkleap shouted, his sides heaving with his frantic breaths.

Blue had hobbled forward but seemed almost frozen at the sight of his father's bloody body. "I need you to get me lots of cobwebs," Brokensong meowed, turning to look at his troubled yellow eyes.

Without even a whimper, he turned and ran towards Brokensong's den. The medicine cat had already started looking over Cairn's wounds.

"This bite in his throat is what's causing the most damage. If it doesn't stop bleeding, I'm not sure I can save him," she muttered. At that instant, Blue reappeared with his mouth stuffed with cobwebs.

Brokensong gently took a small clump, stretching it over the gash in Cairn's throat. Pineheart finally walked through the entrance, with Raven barely conscious pressing into his shoulder.

With a sigh, the black and white tom slumped over and passed out. "Raven's hurt," Pineheart mewed anxiously as he bolted to Brokensong's side.

She looked back at Blue, her good eye squinted as she looked him up and down. "Are you feeling ok enough to go tend to Raven?" she asked slowly.

The small tom nodded hastily, his eyes still alight with terror for his father. "Just dress the wounds with cobweb for now. We will worry about infection after they have stopped bleeding," she instructed him.

Flicking his tail, he streaked away back towards her den. Below her shaky paws, Cairn had grown unnaturally still.

Brokensong growled, pressing her paws against his chest. With rhythmic pushes, she tried to bring the tom back to consciousness. But it was too late.

"What happened?!" A voice rose in distress at the camp entrance. Frostfeather turned, watching as Sun'ka burst through the camp, her patrol hard on her paws.

"Cassius attacked us," Pineheart meowed, "I think he was upset Cairn was letting us stay here. He said he was going to kill us all."

Frostfeather felt her blood turn cold in her veins. Cassius wanted them dead. Sun'ka bent down, resting her muzzle on Cairn's flank. "Goodbye sweet father," she whispered.

As she straightened, she turned to the surrounding Dockcats and IceClan warriors. "This day has brought a tremendous loss," she began, "Cairn was a noble leader."

Her voice shook as she cast her gaze down at Cairn's lifeless body. "He didn't deserve to die this way," she whimpered.

Elkleap stepped forward, pressing his side against Sun'ka. "Yes, you are right. Cairn did not deserve to die because of us. We are forever humbled by his generosity," he meowed.

Brokensong's expression was blank, unreadable. Frostfeather wondered what was going through her mind. Blue had wandered back over to their sides, his paws caked with Raven's blood.

"I stopped the bleeding," he meowed, sounding somewhat relaxed despite the alarming situation.

"That's excellent," Brokensong purred, bending down to touch her

nose to the young tom's head.

"Is Cairn starting to feel better?" he asked hopefully, peeking around Brokensong to look at his brown tabby fur.

All of the gathered cats held their breath. Brokensong's whiskers quivered with sadness as she replied, "I'm sorry Blue. Cairn is.. dead."

Frostfeather's heart twisted as Blue nuzzled his muzzle into Cairn's fur. As he did, the other Dockside cats started to push forward so they may also nestle their noses into his cold fur.

The Clan cats hung back momentarily, watching in silence. Elkleap padded forward and gently touched his forepaw to Sun'ka's flank. She looked up at him, her eyes so full of grief for her slain father.

"We should probably leave," Elkleap murmured, "I don't want to see any more death from this trouble we've caused."

Her gaze hardened, the grief pushed back to be replaced by a cold determination. "No! Cassius isn't just going to boss us around," she growled, "if he wants to fight, then we will fight."

Jewel, the eldest of the Dockcats, spoke up from her place beside Cairn's body. "This is not a time to talk of violence," she meowed, "we will need to prepare to take Cairn to the Den of the Sky at dusk."

They fell silent, gathering close around Cairn's body. Frostfeather felt her muscles relax as she sat in vigil beside the others. *I guess we aren't really so different*, she thought to herself. She could still remember their short vigil for Smallfire, but it felt like a lifetime behind her.

She took a deep breath, the last wisps of Cairn's scent tickling her whiskers. *I'm sorry we did this to you*, the wretched thought filled her mind as she curled her tail closer around her side. *IceClan do not belong here.*

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dusk was gathering over the mourning cats like a thick fog. It had been utterly silent except for their labored breathing, punctuated by whimpers of grief. Jewel got to her paws, her legs stiff from their vigil. "It is time," she murmured.

Frostfeather slowly lifted herself to her feet, the Dockcats rising around her. Sun'ka turned to her group mates, her jade eyes brimming with sadness. "Today we have lost a noble, caring leader," she began, "his life was taken so that IceClan may stays."

The Dockcats turned their sorrowful gazes on the Clan cats. Frostfeather backed away, feeling tremendous guilt that it was her Clan who had driven Cairn to his downfall.

"We shall honor his life by pledging to protect IceClan. For as long as they may bless our presence, we will lay down our lives so that they may live among us." Sun'ka meowed, her voice strong despite her overwhelming sadness.

"Oh no, that's not necessary," Brokensong started to meow but she was quickly silenced by one of the Dock cats.

"He was always close with the spirit of these lands. May he watch over us during these troubling times," Sun'ka mewed, her voice wavering on the last few words.

Elkleap started to move forward, his face creased with concern but Falcon blocked his way. "She must bear this burden alone," the tom growled.

Sharp prickles rushed up Frostfeather's spine. *She must bear this burden alone,* the words rang like bird song in her head.

The Clan cats stayed back while Jewel and Falcon bent to pick up Cairn's body. Carefully, they placed him atop Sun'ka's slender shoulders.

Blue whimpered and turned, rushing towards Brokensong's side. She lowered her head and touched her nose to his ear, "I wish we could have prevented this," she whispered. She then walked over to Raven's side and escorted him to the safety of her den.

"Now we will carry Cairn's body to the Den of the Sky, to be buried," Jewel mewed as she turned to the IceClan cats. "It is not customary to have strangers there, but I'm sure Cairn would rather you be there."

Sootsplash and Meadowshine exchanged uncertain glances as Lionpaw nuzzled closer to her mother's side. Elkleap nodded, his muscles taut as he stared at Sun'ka. Brokensong looked uncertain as she reapperead from her den. Frostfeather could feel Pineheart quivering next to her, but to her surprise he actually answered.

"Yes, we will join you," his voice was strong, filled with such intense emotion.

"Very well," Jewel murmured. At that, Sun'ka turned and started to slowly walk towards the entrance. The dock cats clustered around her, shouldering the burden of Cairn's lifeless body.

The Clan cats followed in their own group close behind. Frostfeather looked up to the darkening sky, gray storm clouds covering its entire length. She shivered, feeling dread sweep over her.

The soft thuds of pawsteps echoed down the alley, the only noise aside from the collective breathing of all of the cats. Their trek seemed to last a lifetime; but, finally, a splash of light appeared at the end of the pathway.

Sun'ka padded into the open, making a sharp right turn to continue along the edge of the dockworker's buildings. Frostfeather watched Blue and Drizzle's gray pelts as they turned the corner ahead of them.

A fresh gust of air buffeted Frostfeather's face as she padded out. She held back a gasp as she laid her eyes on the sea. It had turned an angry black, the windswept waters clashing and rolling with

wild abandon.

It was only a short distance before Sun'ka turned down another alleyway, her orange pelt disappearing into the shadows of the tunnel. The Dock cats followed without hesitation, their heads bowed in grief. Elkleap was right behind, his tail flicking as he hovered at the rear of the Dock cats.

Frostfeather heard Lionpaw start to whisper something but she was quickly hushed by Meadowshine's stern voice. As she padded into the darkness, another gust of wind whipped down the passage. It sounded like claws scraping against rock, like a million cats hissing in her direction.

She flattened her ears, hoping to block out he harsh noise. But as they padded further and further, the wind grew even more fierce. Frostfeather could almost hear voices, clearly distressed and full of anger.

Just as she was going to turn to Pineheart, the large group of Dock cats padded out into the Den of the Sky. A stray beam of moonlight pierced the clouds, illuminating Sun'ka's fiery pelt.

Frostfeather hurried after her Clanmates as they burst into the open. Sun'ka was already bending down, letting Cairn's body slide to the ground. The moonlight showered over him, making him look ethereal.

Stone, Falcon, and Sparrow padded over to the massive tree, their tails dragging in the dirt behind them. Frostfeather couldn't help but watch as they started to dig up the earth near the base of the leafy shrine.

Jewel turned and walked back over to the Clan cats, her shoulders hunched with the weight of grief. "It is customary to hold this ceremony after the death of our leader. As we bury them next to the Heart of the Sky, we name their heir as leader," she explained.

"That means Sun'ka will be leader," Brokensong stated.

Jewel nodded in reply. Smog and Olive lingered a few paces away,

watching the burial in a shocked silence. Lily was standing only a rabbit hop away from the others while they dug Cairn's grave.

Drizzle had huddled close to Lionpaw and Meadowshine, her white and gray fur spiked with tension. Frostfeather wished she could comfort them, but it was pointless.

Eventually, the hole was big enough to lay Cairn at rest. Sun'ka gathered her groupmates around her with a sweeping motion of her fluffy orange tail.

The Clan cats hurried forward, keeping to the edge of the group. "Now, we will say our last goodbyes before we let the earth reclaim him," she meowed.

She dipped her head low, whispering something into her father's ear. As she stepped away, Jewel quickly took her place. Frostfeather felt her fur prickle uncomfortably as she edged closer.

Each Dockside cat bent forward to say their last kind words to their noble leader. As they came to the end, it was Blue and Drizzle's turn. The she-cat went first, her whiskers drooping as she nuzzled her nose in Cairn's cheek fur.

As she walked away, Blue stared at his father. He seemed frozen, still not wanting to accept that his father was dead. He wailed in distress, flinging himself over Cairn's shoulders.

"No! No!" he cried, his blue eyes wild as he turned to look at the others. "He can't leave! He can't be dead!"

Sun'ka quickly stepped forward and grabbed his scruff in her jaws, pulling him off. "I know you are upset," she grunted, "but this is your only chance to say your last words to him. I don't want you to regret this."

He shot her a mutinous glare, his tiny claws sliding from the sheaths. With a sigh, Sun'ka retreated back to where she had been sitting while the others said their goodbyes.

As Blue finished, Elkleap stepped forward. His shoulders were slumped with the same sorrow as the Dock cats. He rested his

muzzle for a few moment's on top of Cairn's head, closing his eyes as he took a small breath.

"Thank you.." he whispered, "for taking us in. I'll make sure Sun'ka stays safe."

As he, too, retreated to the side of the clearing, the other Clan cats took their turn. Sootsplash and Meadowshine both gave quiet thank-you'd, while Lionpaw was too stunned to speak. Brokensong came next, her good eye scanning over Cairn's fur.

"You daft fur ball," she choked, "you should have just listened to what Fable told you! You were still so young.."

Frostfeather stiffened with shock at Brokensong's words. *I don't think I was supposed to hear that,* she thought hastily.

As Brokensong stepped away, Frostfeather found herself tiptoeing closer to Cairn's body. She looked over his corpse, completely unmarred except for the splash of blood that had dried around his throat.

"If you dare to look for StarClan, I'm sure they'd be waiting for you," she whispered as she brought her muzzle close to Cairn's ear. "Blizzardstar would be foolish to welcome you amongst their ranks."

She sat back, feeling content with what she had said. Despite that, she didn't want to back away. She wanted to say more, but just couldn't find the words.

Begrudgingly, she went to join her Clanmates a few steps away. Pineheart was last, his tail flicking uncomfortably as he grew close. He sat over him for a few moments, his head bowed with sadness.

"We could have died out there," he meowed, loud enough for everyone to hear him, "but instead you let us stay. You welcomed us to the docks."

He shut his eyes tight, turning his head away from the emotional scene. "You didn't have to give up your life for us, but you did. Your sacrifice will never be forgotten."

The Dockside cats murmured in agreement, their eyes still shining with sadness. As he turned to join the others, Sun'ka once more stepped up to her father's side.

But this time, Falcon and Sparrow joined her. Together, they lifted Cairn's body and carried it towards the Heart of the Sky. Everyone clustered behind them, following the trio to the lip of the deeply dug hole.

They set Cairn down lightly at the edge, his brown tabby striped tail dipping down into the earthen grave. Using both paws, Sun'ka gently pushed him over and into the hole.

"I *will* avenge you," Sun'ka meowed as she looked down at his sleep-like form.

A low crack of thunder sounded in the distance, making Frostfeather jump. "Now we should go back and eat," Sun'ka instructed as she turned to her groupmates, "no one has eaten since dawn. I don't want anyone getting sick."

Falcon pawed the dirt back into the hole, covering Cairn's body from view. The Dockcats and IceClan members lingered for a few more heartbeats, staring with longing at the mound of dirt where Cairn was buried.

"May StarClan light our path," Brokensong muttered as they started to head towards the alleyway.

"Indeed..." Sun'ka whispered as she lead the way back into the alley to start their journey back home.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The sun was shining brightly in the sky as Pineheart stumbled out into the camp. He had been gripped in a depression-like state for the past few days, not even wanting to leave camp.

Everyone was acting much the same, too grief stricken to even feed themselves. Elkleap would leave with Sun'ka at dawn to hunt and return at sunhigh with enough prey for all.

Nobody minded their absence, and it seemed the pair were growing closer every passing minute. Sun'ka had hardened like unbreakable stone in the wake of Cairn's death but she had also grown closer to Elkleap. He cared for her, and he knew she cared for him.

As Pineheart groggily plodded towards the fresh-kill pile, Brokensong rushed towards him from her den. Her one yellow eye was glazed with anxiety.

"I need you to go and find me burdock root," she gasped, clearly out of breath.

"Has Raven's wounds become infected?" he asked seriously.

"I was suspecting they were infected yesterday, but now they're dripping with puss!" she whispered, her eye wide.

"Don't worry I'll go find some burdock root," Pineheart mewed. He hastily dipped his head and started to pad away. With a shake of his ebony fur, he started bounding down the pitch-black alley.

As he dashed onto the wooden surface of the dock, he slammed to a halt. At the edge of the docks, on the water, were huge, towering objects. They swayed as the ocean rolled, their tree-like tops waving some sort of thin paper.

Pineheart knew he couldn't delay. As a dockworker appeared and started walking towards the object, he whirled around and bounded

into the tall grass at the edge of the docks.

The grass tickled his nose, making him sneeze. Sunshine reached across the field, stopping at the edge of the trees where the forest was lost to shadow. Pineheart slowed, staring into the darkness with narrowed eyes.

I know you're out there Cassius, he thought angrily. But if the rogue was lurking, he made no signs. Pineheart approached the edge of the trees without a challenge.

He began to inspect the leafy stalks for the spiky pods of the burdock plant. He looked inward, where the leafy canopy left the ground shrouded in shadows. There, he caught a glimpse of a sharp green ball, peeking behind the trunk of a tree.

Tentatively, he stepped past the tree line. The darkness made his pelt turn cold, a stark contrast to the bright sunshine in the field. He crept slowly into the forest, his pelt spiked with fear.

He could feel someone watching him, from somewhere in the shade. He neared the burdock, it's spiky pods bobbing in the slight breeze.

"Is it typical for Clan cats to hunt plants?" A frighteningly familiar voice meowed from a few paces away.

Pineheart jumped and whirled around to come face to face with Cassius. His gray and white fur was still caked with dried blood, his wounds still crusted and slightly oozing.

"Don't worry, I'm not here to kill you," he snickered, his yellow eyes intense as he stared at Pineheart.

"How do I know that?" Pineheart growled, taking a step back.

"I'm still too weak.. even I know I couldn't stand a chance against you at this state," he meowed.

Pineheart wasn't convinced. He unsheathed his claws, ready for whenever Cassius decided to strike.

"Why don't you just collect your flowers and leave?" Cassius grunted, "they must be important if they sent you onto my land."

"They're going to cure Raven's infection," Pineheart muttered, flicking his tail as he brought himself closer to the burdock plant.

"That cures infection?" Cassius asked, "interesting..."

"Yeah, you just chew up the root and smear it on the open wound," Pineheart explained, feeling his pelt prickle as he started to dig delicately near the base of the leafy stalks.

"I've never heard of using plants to cure sickness," Cassius mumbled as he watched Pineheart dig.

"Lots of plants are good for lots of different things," he assured him, "our medicine cat knows all of the remedies."

Just as he finished speaking, he plucked a decent size root from the depths of his small hole. "This should be plenty," he meowed.

"Maybe you should put some on my scratches, before you go," Cassius meowed slyly, "I would be greatful for your help."

Pineheart turned to stare at the massive gray and white tom. He noticed how angry red his gashes looked, how easy it would be for them to become infected. "Why should I help you?" he dared to ask, a slight tremor in his voice.

Cassius chuckled, shaking his head slowly. "I see in your eyes, that haunted look. I know you have felt your claws take the lives of others. But there's something else there too... the conviction to do what's right."

Pineheart looked down at his paws, thinking of Nightvolt and Smallfire's unfortunate deaths. "I know you don't want Cairn's brother to die too," he whispered.

"But why did you have to kill him?" Pineheart asked feebly, "why would you ever want to kill your own brother?"

Cassius sighed, letting his tail snake around to cover his fore paws.

"I never wanted him to die..." he began, "I just wanted him to realize, how badly he had treated me when we were kits. I just wanted him to see, how much potential I had."

"My sister and I have always been kind to one another," Pineheart mumbled, "we've always been there for each other."

"So you have a littermate too," Cassius mewed softly, "is she here, with you?"

"She's back at the camp," he revealed, "she's been helping Sun'ka and Elkleap with hunting lately."

"Elkleap..." Cassius hummed, "that's that black and brown tom?"

Pineheart nodded. Cassius's tail tip twitched, betraying his hidden annoyance for Elkleap. "Is he your leader?" he asked curiously.

"Well we don't really have a leader," Pineheart explained, "our old leader died before we left to find a new home."

"I see.." he murmured. Pineheart felt his muscles finally relax, his fur smoothing along his spine.

"Your scratches do look pretty bad.." Pineheart meowed after a few moments of silence. Cassius tilted his head, trying to look at the slashes across his chest.

"I haven't really gotten the chance to clean them properly," the big tom huffed.

Pineheart bent forward, sniffing the crusted wounds across his pelt. They smelled sour, unclean.

"I probably should help you," Pineheart mewed after a few moments.

"I would be greatful for your help," Cassius purred. Pineheart tried to detect any hint of sarcasm or contempt, but Cassius genuinely sounded sincere.

He turned and grabbed the burdock root, using his claws to split it

in half. Before he went to chew up the root, he moved around Cassius's body so he could see all of the scratches. There were a few large ones on his chest and a few smaller ones along his flank. But the punctures he saw in Cassius's neck made his blood turn cold.

"Did Cairn leave these?" Pineheart asked shakily, feeling fresh grief surge through his heart.

"Yes, he bit my neck but I knew he didn't have it in him to try and kill me," Cassius grumbled, "I think he was just trying to scare me."

"I don't think Cairn wanted to see you die," Pineheart whispered as he started to slowly groom the dried blood from his fur. It tasted disgusting, like salty sludge on his tongue.

"He was always soft," Cassius sighed, rolling on his side so that Pineheart could clean the cuts on his side.

The pair carried on in silence as Pineheart finished cleaning Cassius's wounds. He started to chew up the half of the burdock root, and then spat the slimy poultice onto his cuts.

"That feels better already," Cassius purred as Pineheart started to lick the root into the open wounds.

"Just try not to let them open again," Pineheart warned as Cassius got to his paws. The rogue leader towered over him, almost double his size.

"I will take your advice," Cassius mewed, "I will wait to heal and then return to wipe out the rest of the Dockside cats."

Pineheart flexed his claws, feeling fresh terror sweep over him. "Why would you want to wipe them out?!" he gasped.

"Well now that I've killed Cairn, what is stopping them from coming to kill me?" Cassius asked seriously.

Pineheart flashed back to Cairn's burial, where Sun'ka had sworn revenge on her father's behalf.

"This is how I will repay your kindness," Cassius grunted, "you can

take your Clan cats and leave before I return with my second strike."

"But can't you just leave them alone?" he whispered, his voice hoarse.

"No, I don't think I can.." he sounded regretful, but his eyes still shone with the light of battle, "I'm sorry."

You're sorry! He wanted to yowl out loud with anger but he held it back. "I can't guarantee my Clan will want to leave," he said.

"Then you will die alongside them," Cassius growled. With a flick of his tail, the rogue leader turned and started to lumber away.

"Goodbye, Clan cat," he meowed over his shoulder before being swallowed by the shadows.

Hastily, Pineheart grabbed the remaining half of the root and dashed out of the trees. Without looking back, he bounded across the field and onto the hard surface of the docks.

His heart pounding, out of breath, he streaked down the alley towards camp. As he burst into the open, he almost slammed into Brokensong who was pacing near the entrance.

"What took you so long?" she demanded.

"It was harder to find than I thought," he lied, his whiskers burning with guilt.

"It doesn't matter now," Brokensong sighed, "Raven has already passed away."

"What?!" Pineheart shouted.

"The infection was too strong. I couldn't save him," she sobbed, her shoulders hunched with defeat.

He turned to look at the center of camp, where Brokensong had already brought Raven's body out for vigil. Olive and Smog, his siblings, were already laying at his side. Drizzle, Blue,

Meadowshine, Sootsplash, and Lionpaw were laying only a few paces away.

"Is Sun'ka here?" Pineheart asked as he turned his gaze back to Brokensong.

"Yes, she's in her den with Elkleap," she replied.

With a quick farewell, he trotted across the camp towards the den Cairn had previously lived in. As he approached, the brown tabby's scent tickled his whiskers.

He let out a soft meow, hoping Sun'ka could hear him.

"Pineheart?" her confused voice drifted from behind the entrance.

"Yes, I have come to have a word with you," he mewed through the entrance.

"You may come in," she mewed.

As he entered, he noticed Elkleap sitting directly beside the orange pelted leader. Their tails were twined together, their flanks touching.

"If this is a bad time, I can come back," Pineheart blurted, preparing to turn and walk back out the entrance.

"No, that isn't necessary," Sun'ka assured him. She exchanged a look with Elkleap, and then he stood and left the den.

"What is it you wanted to speak with me about?" she asked gently as Pineheart stepped closer.

"Cassius was at the border when I went looking for burdock root," he began, "he was too weak to fight.. but he told me that he *would* be coming back to wipe out the Dockside cats, after his wounds had healed."

Sun'ka had closed her eyes, her tail flicking beside her. "Yes, this is troubling news," she whispered.

"He told me that my Clan should leave, before the battle," he continued.

"Then perhaps that *is* what you should do," Sun'ka pressed, "surely you should think of what's best for your Clan."

"But how could we just leave you to face him? He won't be happy until you're all dead!" he whimpered, feeling his heart start to race.

"The outcome of this battle is still shrouded in mist, there's no way to see who will emerge victorious," Sun'ka murmured, "but IceClan should leave."

Pineheart felt anxiety grip his limbs, making it hard to think clearly. "But we cant just leave you," he repeated.

She leaned forward and touched her nose to his forehead. "But it must be done," she whispered, "the only thing I will ask, is that you make sure Blue goes with you."

"Blue.." Pineheart echoed, envisioning the small gray tom cat.

"If my cats are to be killed, you must take as many of them with you as you can. Their destinies will not be to die on these docks," she explained.

"I... I.. can't guarantee, but I will try," he promised.

"Thank you," Sun'ka breathed. Pineheart turned to go, his heart still racing in his chest.

"Please send Elkleap back in once you leave," she instructed him.

Without another word, he bustled out of the den. More of the Dockside cats had appeared to sit vigil for Raven. Elkleap was sitting only a rabbit hop away, staring at the scene before him.

"Sun'ka wants you to go back in there," Pineheart mewed as he neared.

"Is everything ok?" Elkleap asked hesitantly.

Pineheart wondered if he should say what Sun'ka had just told him, but it would most likely be best he kept his mouth shut. If she wanted him to know, she would tell him.

"I'm not sure," Pineheart muttered.

"I'm sure it'll be ok," Elkleap reasoned before turning and disappearing back into the den with Sun'ka.

I hope you're right, Pineheart thought miserably as he went to join Frostfeather beside the cold body of Raven.

Chapter Thirty

Frostfeather could feel Pineheart as he jostled beside her. Raven's stiff, cold body was still resting at her paw tips. The moon had risen high in the clear night sky, bathing the clearing in its gentle light.

"It is time.." Sun'ka breathed, standing from her position near Raven's head. Elkleap leapt up at her side, instantly alert. "I'd like you to stay," she purred to him.

Falcon stepped up beside them, preparing to lift Raven's body for the trek to the Den of the Sky. Sun'ka bent down, allowing him to rest Raven along her spine. As Elkleap retreated to his den, Lily took his place to escort Sun'ka to the Den of the Sky.

The rest of the Dockcats and Clan cats got to their paws, watching in silence as the trio slowly padded out of the camp and into the darkness. Olive let out a wail, burying her muzzle into Smog's fur.

Frostfeather made her way towards them, a knot forming in her throat. "I'm sorry about your brother," she murmured, "it's always hard to lose a loved one."

"Life has just gotten so unpredictable here," Olive whimpered, "how do I know it won't be me, or Smog next? Cassius has tried for so long to destroy us."

Smog nodded sadly, "it seemed to get better once you all arrived... but I guess everything good has to come to an end."

Yes, everything good does come to an end, Frostfeather reminded herself. They had gotten to cozy, too comfortable with the Dockside cats.

Taking a step back, Frostfeather turned towards the den she shared with Stone and Pineheart. As she walked inside, she noticed that they had both already settled into their nests and fallen asleep.

Feeling a slight itch in her paws, she sighed and turned back out into the camp clearing. Almost everyone had receded into their respective dens. Only the solitary silver and white form of Jewel remained.

Frostfeather slowly walked up to her side, hoping not to startle the old she-cat.

"These coming days will be what determines if my group will continue to live on these docks," Jewel murmured as Frostfeather sat.

"What do you mean? Of course you belong on the docks. It is us who should be leaving," Frostfeather insisted.

"No... it has always been this way," Jewel hummed, "we have been plagued by Cassius for too long."

Frostfeather swished her tail against Jewel, feeling her fur shivering at her touch. "I remember when Cairn and Cassius were born. They had so much promise, so much potential.."

"Why did he leave?" Frostfeather asked softly.

"Well, Cairn and Cassius never truly had a father. We suspect it was a rogue, possibly. Or even just one of us who didn't want to be labeled as the mate of a leader," Jewel shrugged her shoulders, "of that, we are not sure. But Fable always treated Cairn in favor of Cassius. Neither of them ever gave Cassius the love and compassion he deserved."

Frostfeather felt sadness prick her heart. How could a mother ever favor one kit over another? "After he grew up, his anger worsened. I suspect that when Fable finally passed, it was he who killed her," Jewel whispered.

Frostfeather gasped, "why would you think he killed her?" she wondered aloud.

"Well... because I watched him," she mumbled, her voice barley louder than a whisper, "he lured her to the dock and pushed her in. No one knew where her body went, but I am sure it got swept away

in the ocean."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" she asked skeptically.

Jewel shuffled her paws, a distressed look on her face. "I knew how much he had suffered... I couldn't blame him for wanting to kill Fable. I wish things would have been different. If I could have helped him, I would have."

"It seems like you care a good deal about him," Frostfeather observed, "but why?"

Jewel stared hard into Frostfeather's eyes, her pupils dilating as she started to speak, "I have always cared for Fable's kits. But how could I confess what I thought about how she was raising them? Even though she was my littermate, she was always prideful."

Understanding, clear as rain, washed over Frostfeather. "So Fable was your sister," she breathed.

Jewel shifted her gaze, looking at the camp wall behind Frostfeather. "Yes, Fable was my sister," she purred, "no one remembers, or are too young to remember. But I think I prefer it that way."

"Do you think Cassius is ever going to stop?" Frostfeather mewed quietly.

Jewel returned her cold stare back to Frostfeather, her shoulders stiff and her tail tip twitching. "No... I don't think he will stop until all of the Dockcats are dead."

Jewel must have seen the terror in her eyes, she leaned forward to nuzzle Frostfeather comfortingly. "But you never intended to stay here forever," she pointed out, "perhaps that just means that you and your friends should leave."

"I'm not sure everyone will want to leave," Frostfeather muttered, "this feels like home to them now."

"Maybe you should consult with your group leader," Jewel suggested calmly. Frostfeather knew they hadn't formally appointed

a new leader, but Elkleap had selflessly taken the role.

"Yeah, I'll go talk with him," Frostfeather agreed, "thanks."

Jewel waved her tail as Frostfeather started to pad away. She wasn't sure where the brown and black tom was, he was usually glued to Sun'ka's side but she had left to take Raven to the Den of the Sky.

Turning towards Sun'ka's den, she noticed a gleam of rusty yellow eyes in the depths of the wooden box. She quickly trotted over, not wanting to waste any time.

"Elkleap," she called as she stopped a few paces away from the entrance.

"Yes?" he asked, his shoulder fur rippling as he took the few steps to bring himself into the open.

"I have been worrying," she began, casting an anxious glance behind her at Jewel, who was still sitting peacefully in the center of camp.

"When are you not worrying?" he teased as his tail curled closely around his side.

"Well, it seems most of the Dock cats are saying Cassius is going to strike another attack," she explained, "I wasn't sure when you thought we should leave? We really have overstayed our welcome, I'm sure they want to deal with their issues on their own."

The humor in Elkleap's eyes faded to be replaced by a stone-like anger. Frostfeather braced herself, unsure of what he was going to say.

"I see..." he murmured.

Frostfeather waited for him to continue but he had fallen silent. He looked up to the sky, streaked with the sun's rays as it rose for the morning.

"It isn't the way of a warrior to abandon your friends when they're in trouble," he finally meowed, "IceClan will leave, after Cassius is defeated."

Frostfeather held back a growl of frustration. *After?!*

"How do you expect to kill Cassius when Cairn couldn't?" she dared to ask.

"I have StarClan on my side," he grunted.

"StarClan would want you to lead their Clan to a new home," Frostfeather argued.

"How do you know what they want!" his voice suddenly boomed in anger, "our ancestors haven't spoken with you in how long?! How do you know *this* isn't where they wanted us to live?"

Frostfeather recoiled, surprised by his abrupt outburst. She opened her mouth for a retort but nothing came.

"Blizzardstar would understand what is keeping me here," Elkleap continued, a challenge in his usual silky tone. "He would realize how happy I am, with Sun'ka."

"But what about us?" Frostfeather whispered, her voice cracking with sadness.

"What about *me,*" Elkleap countered, "I've lost my family, my apprentice, my entire life as warrior. With Sun'ka I feel... like everything is going to be ok."

"But it won't be ok!" Frostfeather insisted, "Cassius will come, and he won't stop until he kills everyone!"

Elkleap laughed softly, shaking his head back and fourth. "No, Cassius will not kill everyone. He *will* be defeated. And after he is gone, IceClan will leave. Without me."

"What?!" Frostfeather gasped, "we can't leave without you!"

Elkleap didn't respond. He had turned his attention to the camp entrance, where Sun'ka was returning with Falcon and Sparrow close behind her.

Frostfeather watched in silence as Elkleap jumped up and ran to

greet her. Lily and Falcon had already disappeared into their dens. Jewel was also nowhere to be found.

Elkleap drew closer to Sun'ka, wrapping his body around her side. She leaned into him, burying her muzzle into his neck fur.

I don't see this ending well, she thought to herself as she finally stood and trotted over to her den. Inside, Stone and Pineheart were still fast asleep.

"StarClan help us," Frostfeather whispered as she tucked into her nest and fell asleep.

Chapter Thirty-One

Several more days passed without even a peep from Cassius and his rogues. This morning brought clear, peaceful skies to the cats that lived along the docks.

Pineheart had already missed the morning patrols, but he was perfectly content to lounge with Lionpaw, Drizzle, and Meadowshine as they stretched out along the earthen floor.

The dusky black tom started to thump the tip of his tail off the dirt. As soon as it started to move, Lionpaw tensed her muscles. As she twisted around, she caught the tip of Pineheart's tail in her paws.

Drizzle screeched with excitement as she stood and leapt. Lionpaw growled as Drizzle bowled her over.

"You two are so rambunctious," Meadowshine sighed as she rolled onto her back. The sun cascaded down the sides of the camp walls and shined like fire on her tortoiseshell coat.

"Aren't you getting to old to play like a kit?" Pineheart asked Lionpaw cheekily.

The russet apprentice batted at his tail, her eyes shined mischievously. "I'm not that old..." she purred.

Meadowshine chuckled as she rubbed her shoulder blades into the warm ground. "You are nearly old enough to be a warrior now," she pointed out.

"Am I old enough to be a warrior?" Drizzle squeaked in excitement.

Pineheart pulled his tail closer, Lionpaw still watching like a hawk. "In a Clan, you would need to train as an apprentice before you became a warrior," he informed her.

"What sort of things do apprentices do?" she asked in wonder.

Pineheart got up and into a sitting position, his attention on the inquisitive silver she-cat. "Well, they usually go practice hunting and patrolling with their mentors. They learn the territory, and what's in it. Their mentors teach them battle techniques and how to defend themselves. And when they are in camp, they help to take care of the elders," he explained.

"That sounds like hard work," Drizzle mewed.

"It is!" Lionpaw puffed, "Weaseltail would always take me out at dawn to hunt. We wouldn't come back to camp until I had caught at least three pieces of prey!"

"Wow, I haven't caught any prey for myself yet," Drizzle murmured.

"Don't you have a mentor of some sort?" Meadowshine asked in shock. She rolled over and turned her head to listen to Drizzle.

"No, usually whenever I go out with a patrol, they just all show me how to do things and take turns with teaching me things," she replied evenly.

"That sounds weird," Lionpaw muttered.

"That's just because our groups behave differently," Pineheart pointed out gently. Drizzle just shrugged, clearly oblivious as to why it even mattered.

"Well, I could train you for today," Pineheart offered, "I can take you and Lionpaw out hunting. Then you could try and catch your first prey."

He was delighted to see her eyes shine with happiness. "That sounds great!" she chimed.

"Do you want me to come with?" Meadowshine volunteered, "they're a rowdy pair."

"Sure, we can all go," he replied.

As she stood, the two she-cats bounced away excitedly. Meadowshine was already on her paws. Pineheart glanced upward,

taking note of the position of the light in the sky. It would be sunhigh soon.

He trotted after Meadowshine as the two young she-cats slid down the alley of the camp entrance. The usual darkness of the close buildings still made Pineheart's pelt crawl with unease.

As they padded out into the open, Pineheart noticed that the bulky wooden objects still floated on the ocean at the edge of the docks. Dockworkers rushed all along the edge of the land, they shouted to each other as they carried things in their outstretched paws.

Pineheart turned left, towards the grassy meadow. Lionpaw and Drizzle had ran a good deal ahead, their tails waved in the air as they skipped back and fourth between the buildings and the ocean at the edge of the dock.

"Warriors walk beside the rest of the patrol," Meadowshine called after them, her voice stern.

Lionpaw stopped and trotted back to Pineheart and Meadowshine, Drizzle right behind. "I know," Lionpaw chirped, "the air is just so refreshing out here."

"I agree, but we should be traveling with a bit more caution. I'm not sure what those floating dockworker things are," Pineheart explained.

"Oh, those?" Drizzle purred, "those are boats!"

"Boats..?" Meadowshine mewed slowly, clearly puzzled.

"Yeah! The Dockworkers use them to transport their things across the ocean," Drizzle informed them. Her eyes shined with pride, happy to know something the Clan cats didn't.

"So these boats go to other land? Across the big water?" Pineheart asked in amazement. *How big is this world*, he thought curiously.

"Yeah but they only show up for a small part of newleaf, and won't come back until next newleaf," she mewed.

"Well, lets carry on," Meadowshine urged as she started to walk towards the meadow.

Pineheart slid after her as Drizzle and Lionpaw bounded along at the back of the patrol. Eventually, the four cats were surrounded by tall, thick grass. The stems tickled Pineheart's nose, and he let out a small sneeze.

"Alright, this is where we will hunt," Meadowshine purred as she looked at the dense grasses that enveloped them.

"How are we going to find any prey in the grass?" Drizzle giggled as she waved her tail in the air.

"Well you *won't* find any if you show them where we are hiding," she teased. She pointed her muzzle at Drizzle's sweeping tail, "if you're disturbing the grass, prey will know we are here," she informed her.

Drizzle quickly pulled down her tail to let it rest on the ground. Pineheart had to suppress his laughter, Drizzle really didn't seem to know how to hunt!

"So when you're stalking your prey, you need to crouch as low as you can to the ground," Meadowshine mewed as she dipped down, her belly fur brushed the ground lightly.

Drizzle imitated her, her eyes shined with excitement as she watched Meadowshine continue. The tortie she-cat started to very slowly bring one paw forward. Pineheart sat back and watched as she creeped through the grass.

"You'll want to try and make the least amount of noise you can. Any prey that's on the ground will hear you right away," Pineheart cut in while Meadowshine carried on her demonstration.

Lionpaw had crouched and glided forward with the ease of any Clanborn cat. But Drizzle looked awkward, and he tail continued to brush the grass as she padded by.

"I don't think I'm doing it right," she complained, her fur hot with embarrassment.

"That's alright. It just looks like your tail is brushing the grass. Try to bring it close to your side, or hold it above the ground," Meadowshine purred. She padded over and guided Drizzle's tail with her nose as she tucked it against her flank.

"Now try," Meadowshine chirped as she sat back. Lionpaw had disappeared, only the subtle wave of grass in the distance to show where she was hunting.

Drizzle once more crept forward, her posture improving with each step.

"That looks right to me," Pineheart grunted as he watched Drizzle cross the tiny stretch of ground in front of him. "We don't want to take too long. We should try and find some prey now," he urged.

"I think I can do it," Drizzle meowed in determination as she jumped up and whirled to face the two older cats.

Meadowshine nodded as she stood and started to lead the way through the thick grass. Ths harsh trill of a songbird erupted nearby but was cut off abruptly.

Lionpaw better leave some prey for Drizzle, Pineheart thought as the padded deeper into the leafy stalks. All around him, he could smell mouse. It was so strong, he had to resist the urge to start hunting them himself.

"Now, you'll want to pinpoint *one* scent," Meadowshine directed the young Drizzle, "and that'll be the scent that you stalk."

Drizzle lifted her delicate nose and sniffed the air. "I think I found something," she squealed excitedly.

"Shhhh... you still have to be quiet," Meadowshine meowed lightly.

Drizzle nodded eagerly as she turned her attention towards the scent she had found. She crouched as close as she could to the ground, her eyes wide.

The small silver she-cat seemed to hover over the grass as she inched forward. As she stopped, Pineheart held his breath. She

began t wag her haunches, her gaze narrowed as she locked on to her prey.

With a mighty leap, she soared between the tall grass stalks and landed with a tremendous *thud!* Meadowshine hurried to her side, her tail held high in the air behind her.

"I caught it!" Drizzle's muffled meow exclaimed.

She turned, and Pineheart purred as he saw the body of a mouse dangle from her jaws. "Excellent job," he praised her.

Just then, Lionpaw reappeared from her hunt. She had a crow and a small vole crammed in between her teeth. "I feel this was a successful patrol," Meadowshine mewed happily.

Pineheart was going to agree, but something had distracted him. As Meadowshine turned to her daughter's catch, Pineheart reared back to look over the top of the grassy landscape.

At the edge of the trees, the familiar gray and white form of Cassius was just barely visible through the shadows. He seemed he was staring straight at them.

Pineheart squinted as he tried to determine what was beside the massive rogue leader. He gasped in horror at what he saw. To both sides of Cassius, rogues swarmed along the border. So many rogues, Pineheart wasn't sure he had ever seen so many in his life.

As he dropped back to all fours, he abruptly turned towards his companions. "It's time to go," he grunted. He started to push Drizzle forward with his muzzle.

"Is something wrong?" Meadowshine asked wearily, her eyes narrowed as she looked at Pineheart.

"We just shouldn't be here," he mewed frantically, "we will be safe back at camp."

Meadowshine didn't argue. As quickly as they had come, the small patrol fled back over the field and onto the wooden surface of the dock.

Yes, we are safe back at camp, Pineheart assured himself as they rushed down the alley back towards their home. As they burst into the camp, he was relieved to see the day going on as normal.

The other patrols had returned for the day, and everyone looked relaxed as they rested in the sun. Lionpaw and Drizzle took their prey to the fresh-kill pile and deposited it with the rest.

"That was fun," Meadowshine commented as she padded past Pineheart into camp.

"Yeah, it was nice," he agreed. *But I can't help but feel that Cassius and his rogues are ready to strike,* he thought.

Hopefully I'm wrong...

Chapter Thirty-Two

Angry, gray storm clouds swelled over the morning sky. The smell of rain was carried on the breeze, quite unlike the salty tang of the ocean air.

Frostfeather sat near the edge of the camp entrance alleyway, her shoulders tense. A small group sat around her, their heads bent inward as they talked. The violent gusts of air threatened to blow their words away with the wind.

"We shouldn't be out too long in this," Elkleap shouted, "this storm seems dangerous!"

Sun'ka lashed her tail beside him, her eyes narrowed to tiny slits. "No! We will have to hunt!" she reminded him.

That was true, despite the whipping of the wind they still had to eat. "Then we will have one hunting patrol," Elkleap meowed loudly as he turned to look at the cats around him.

Not many had dared to leave the comfort of their dens. Only Falcon, Sootsplash, Sparrow, Stone, and Frostfeather hovered nearby to hear their daily duties. "I will lead the patrol," Elkleap began, "Sootsplash, Sparrow, and Stone will join me."

Frostfeather had to lean in closer to be heard, her ears strained to hear what Elkleap was saying. *I don't think he said my name,* she thought as the others turned to pad down the alley.

Sun'ka strode towards her, urging her towards the safety of her den. As they padded inside, the harsh sound of the wind instantly died.

"Did you need to speak with me?" Frostfeather asked in confusion as Sun'ka padded to her nest.

She didn't answer for a few moments. She made herself comfortable in the soft moss of her nest, and turned to look at Frostfeather. "My

den is big enough to share," she purred, "I prefer company than to be alone anyways."

"Why didn't Elkleap just have you join the hunting patrol?" Frostfeather asked curiously.

"He's just trying to help me," Sun'ka assured her, "he knows how hard it's been for me to be leader after Cairn's murder. I know he likes to shoulder my burden."

"That's very kind of him," Frostfeather mewed softly, "that's kind of what he did for me, when we had to leave our home."

Sun'ka's ears perked, her attention instantly drawn to her words. "Really? No one ever told me what happened in your old home," Sun'ka murmured, "Elkleap usually gets upset when I ask him."

Frostfeather's pelt prickled uncomfortably. *What would make him not want to tell her?*

"Well, things were normal for almost my entire life up until one of our elders got sick," she began to retell, surprised that she could still remember it so vividly.

The dreams, all the visions she had of Spottedrose. "My ancestors tried to reach out to me. They wanted me to convince my leader, Blizzardstar, that we had to leave," she meowed.

"He didn't want to believe me at first. He still thought of me as just his kit, that I was just having bad dreams. But after the sick elder went savage and killed one of our apprentices, he knew I was telling the truth," her voice was surprisingly strong, despite the terrible memories that flashed in her mind.

"We went to the Firestone to speak with our ancestors. But when we got there, they had already gone. They had left to find our new home."

Sun'ka gasped, her tail flicked at Frostfeather's words. "How could they just leave you?" she asked in shock.

"They knew we had to leave. And wherever we were going, they

wanted to be there to welcome us," Frostfeather explained.

Sun'ka nodded slowly, not entirely content with her answer. "While we were away at the Firestone, a wolf attacked our camp," Frostfeather continued, "it was infested with the same illness that corrupted our elder. It killed and infected almost all of our Clanmates."

"Blizzardstar knew that the last healthy members of IceClan had to leave to find our new home. He passed over his leadership of IceClan to me, he thought I'd be able to just lead us to find some prophesied land in the stars," her voice cracked, "I should have known it was impossible."

Sun'ka shook her head, "no, I am certain your home is still out there," she insisted.

"How?" she sobbed, "we are at the edge. All that's left is the ocean."

"I'm not sure... but I know you will think of something," Sun'ka assured her, "you made it this far."

"Yeah..." Frostfeather sighed, "I don't think we would have if Elkleap wasn't leading us."

As Frostfeather finally felt her muscles relax, a commotion erupted outside the entrance to Sun'ka's den. Elkleap fell inside, his face and neck streaked with blood.

"Elkleap!" Sun'ka cried as she leapt up and towards the exhausted tom.

"Cassius... he's coming!" Elkleap gasped, his flanks heaved with the effort to breathed, "he killed Sparrow!

"I need to gather the others," Sun'ka mewed as she quickly exited the den. Frostfeather dared to inch closer to Elkleap, her pelt stood on end.

"Are you ok?" she whimpered.

"Yes... we need get everyone out of camp," Elkleap meowed as he

started to push himself back up onto his paws. He seemed a little unstable but he didn't waste any time as he padded out into camp.

Frostfeather followed, relieved to find the gust of wind had declined slightly. Already, almost all of the Dockcats were assembled in the clearing. Sootsplash, Meadowshine, and Lionpaw were huddled beside Brokensong, Blue, and Pineheart.

Jewel hobbled from the depths of her den, her eyes alight with worry. "We will be leaving the camp," Sun'ka addressed the throng of cats, "we want to be out in the open. If Cassius and his rogues trap us here in camp, we are doomed."

"Is Drizzle here?" Meadowshine asked as she looked over the heads of the other cats, "I don't think she got out of her nest."

"I will fetch her. Falcon, lead everyone to the docks," Sun'ka instructed.

He dipped his head and started to make his way down the pitch-black passageway. Frostfeather watched Sun'ka as she strode across the camp towards one of the boxes that lined the edge. Meadowshine was hard on her paws.

Elkleap appeared at her side, his voice weak but a strong determination shone in his eyes. "Are we leaving?" he asked wearily.

"Yeah, we are supposed to go to the docks," Frostfeather meowed.

At the rear of the group, Frostfeather watched as Pineheart's tail tip disappeared down the tunnel. She quickly picked up her paws and followed, Elkleap right beside her.

The tunnel was filled with the sound of frantic pawsteps on the stone walkway. Frostfeather could hear Falcon at the head of the cats, already out on the docks.

"Cassius is coming! Hurry!" he yowled. Frostfeather picked up her pace, her breath hoarse as she bolted down the dark alley. She could see the bright light of the entrance only a few foxlengths away.

As she hurtled into the open, she looked to her left and froze in shock. An entire line of unrecognizable rogues were advancing towards them across the docks. She turned right and started to follow the others, who weren't far ahead. The dockcats were pinned against the buildings as they ran, Dockworkers shouting and stomping as they shot by.

Elkleap was still beside her, his pelt spiked with terror as the rogues yowled and howled behind them. Falcon had stopped the rest of the group just ahead, his gaze locked on the scene before him.

"They're coming this way too!" he shouted, his tail lashed as he scanned the docks for a way to escape. Frostfeather peaked around the others, horrified to see an equally massive line of rogues charging towards them.

Elkleap looked back towards camp, "is Sun'ka here?" he asked shakily.

Oh no she's still back at camp! Frostfeather remembered suddenly. "Meadowshine and Drizzle aren't here either," Sootsplash meowed in disbelief.

Everyone turned their gazes back towards the alleyway towards camp. The rogues were already tearing down the entryway, their pelts instantly swallowed by its darkness.

Sootsplash wailed in distress, "what do we do?" he cried.

"To the boats!" Pineheart yowled.

The Dockcats looked towards the drifting wooden objects for a short moment before surging across the dock and towards the nearest boat. Sootsplash lingered near the building, frozen as he watched the rogues pouring down the tunnel.

"Come on!" Elkleap grunted as he pushed his Clanmate across the wooden planks. Beside the boat, there was a small wooden walkway that sloped up towards its wooden facade.

Pineheart lingered at the end, urging the cats up the tight wooden slope one-by-one. Frostfeather felt it shudder beneath her paws,

wobbling with each step. On the deck of the boat, there weren't any Dockworkers in sight.

She looked up at the massive sails, already amassed and ready for departure. She felt the entire structure of the boat shift, a loud horn sounded nearby.

"What's happening?!" Elkleap yowled as he ran up the last few steps of the slope. Sootsplash tumbled onto the deck beside him, his flanks heaving.

"I think the boat's moving!" Brokensong shouted, her claws unsheathed to try and keep herself stable.

"I don't think everyone is here," Falcon cried as he ran back towards the edge of the massive boat. It was already beginning to pull away from the wooden plank, dropping it into the murky water below.

"Sun'ka!" he shrieked, hoping to hear her voice over all of the commotion.

All around him, the rogues filled the air with their yowls. The loud horn was still booming, combined with the creaking of the boat as it inches further away from the docks.

"It's Meadowshine!" Falcon shouted as he turned to the others, "she's coming!"

Sootsplash instantly leapt to his paws and ran towards the edge of the boat. Already, several foxlengths spanned between the boat and the edge of the wooden docks.

Meadowshine was racing towards the boat, with only the small body of Drizzle right behind her. Frostfeather could see the rogues as they turned to intercept her.

"No!" Sootsplash yowled, ready to leap off the boat to save her.

But before he could move, she had reached the edge of the docks. Her uncertain gaze scanned the boat, her muscles tense. But she did not jump.

She grabbed Drizzle's scruff in her teeth. Using all her might, she reared back on her hind paws and flung Drizzle through the air using her forepaws for a last minute boost. Falcon grabbed her silver fur in his claws, pulling her up onto the safety of the boat.

Frostfeather pushed her way past Falcon, ready to grab Meadowshine as she took her turn to leap. But the tortie she-cat just sat back on her haunches, watching as the boat continued to drift away.

"Meadowshine!" Frostfeather gasped, not taking her eyes off of the IceClan queen. But the rogues were upon her. With screeches of triumph, they surged all around her.

Frostfeather turned back to look at Drizzle who was scarcely breathing. Lionpaw and Drizzle has made their way over the slippery deck and were sniffing her fur.

"Is Meadowshine ok?" Sootsplash whimpered as he tried to see his mate over the edge of the boat.

Frostfeather looked back towards the docks, dismayed to see that Meadowshine was gone. Only the rogues remained, sitting and watching the boat as it sailed onward, towards the horizon.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The constant sway of the boat was enough to make Frostfeather feel ill. Brokensong had taken a moment to look everyone over but they had minimal injuries. All of the cats barely spoke, too gripped by sadness to even muster enough strength to move.

After the docks had vanished from sight, everyone tried their best to find shelter on the exposed deck. Elkleap found a large wooden doorway that led down into the hull. There were some occasional Dockworkers that walked around once in awhile, but they did not disturb the solemn cats.

Now, they were all huddled in the darkness of the enormous hull. It stretched back for many foxlengths, lined with boxes and sacks and containers of all kinds of goods.

Frostfeather rested her head on her paws, a sigh escaped her parted jaws. Beside her, Pineheart lay as motionless as a rock. Falcon had joined Sootsplash and Lionpaw near the opposite wall. While Stone, Lily, Smog, and Olive were huddled in a small pile as they slept.

She looked over to Brokensong, who had not left Drizzle's side since her terrifying fling over the side of the boat. She had hit the deck hard, she dislocated her shoulder and bruised a few of her ribs.

Frostfeather knew the medicine cat couldn't do too much without her stock of herbs, but she wouldn't give up easily. Blue sat by her side, his youthful face had hardened into a morbid mask.

We've all traveled such a gruesome path, she thought as the boat bucked to one side beneath her paws. She skidded on the glossy wooden surface as she tried to keep her balance.

Pineheart murmured something in his sleep beside her, barely jostled by the ship's violent movement. A solitary drip had sprung from the roof nearby. The drops fell in perfect rhythm as they formed a round puddle on the sleek floor.

Surprisingly, a strange feline face poked from the shadows near the hull's gaping door. "I had heard that there were stowaways," the peculiar cat grunted as it stepped into view.

The musky lights that lined the hull shined over the newcomer's pelt. Frostfeather's eyes opened wide as it stepped closer to Brokensong and Drizzle.

"She is hurt," it observed as it bent to sniff Drizzle's fur.

"Yes, this young cat struck the deck hard. I fear she has internal injuries," Brokensong voiced her concerns.

From across the space, Elkleap stood and started to approach the stranger. "Who told you we were here?" he inquired warily, "we have not met any other cats here."

"Oh, no it was not a cat!" The unknown cat chuckled, "I share the might of this ship with a few other animals."

Elkleap's hackles rose behind him as he crouched. "If you think we are weak, I'll be quick to prove you wrong!" he snarled.

The cat threw his head back with a hearty laugh; it's orange, black, and white fur shook with the intensity of its voice. "No, no. We do not fight," he soothed.

Brokensong finally broke her attention from Drizzle as she looked up at the strange cat. "What's your name?" she asked curiously.

The cat was silent for a few moments, it's tail tip flicked faintly in the air behind him. "Oh, my name? I think... a long time ago.. the twolegs called me Captain."

"Captain..." the name rolled like honey from Brokensong's tongue.

Frostfeather had never heard such a name. It sounded so foreign, so oddly out of place. She shuffled her paws as she continued to eavesdrop on their conversation.

Sootsplash glowered with narrowed eyes near the corner. His white body shielded Lionpaw like a curtain, his black spots like shadows

against his fur. Talon also watched with bated breath, ready to leap up if something were to go amiss.

Stone, Lily, Smog, and Olive stayed huddled in their group only a few rabbit hops away. Frostfeather stuck her paw in Pineheart's flank in an attempt to wake him.

"Someone's here," she whispered in his ear as he started to push himself to his paws. Captain had inched even closer to Drizzle, his spotted shoulders hunched as he sniffed along her pelt.

"What other animals are here?" Elkleap urged.

"Some of the gulls," he replied, "they must have seen you when you were still on the deck. They were saying something about strange forest cats."

Gulls, Frostfeather thought in confusion. *I'm not sure what that is.*

"We didn't intend to be here," Elkleap dictated, "we were trying to escape some rogues and just so happened to be onboard when the boat was leaving."

"Ahh, I see," Captain remarked, "well, we should reach shore again eventually. Skull Island is usually their first destination."

All these new words puzzled the Clan cats. They had already been on the boat for several days. How long could a month possibly be?

Elkleap dipped his head to Captain. "Thank you for this information," he praised the spotted tom.

Captain beamed with happiness, his tail held erect behind him. "Oh it's no worry at all! I wish I could help you more," he insisted.

Brokensong's ears perked at his words. "I'm sure we could all use some freshkill," she pointed out, "we haven't had the chance to hunt properly."

Captain nodded eagerly, his eyes shined as he replied, "oh yes! I can do that!"

"Great! I'll come with you," Elkleap volunteered, "that way I know where to hunt if we need more."

Captain flicked his tail as Elkleap started to follow him back out the doorway. "Just don't pay no mind to the twolegs. They like to watch me hunt," he purred.

Frostfeather stared after them as they disappeared from sight. Pineheart grunted beside her. "You woke me up for *that*?" he muttered.

Frostfeather sighed in exasperation. She didn't want to dignify his rude question with a response. The black tom once more lay down and tucked his nose underneath one of his forepaws.

Frostfeather would have liked to sleep too, but it was useless. Her nerves buzzed like an arrant beehive. Elkleap's departure with Captain didn't help her anxiety in the least.

Hopefully we can trust him, she wondered as her companions settled back down around her.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The days stretched on and on. Countless sunrises and sunsets painted the horizon as the ship sailed into the empty distance. After their acquaintance, Captain decided he would stay with the travelers in the hull.

Even now, his bright calico fur was mashed beside Olive and Smog's black coats. He had helped them a lot, with prey and a few herbs he could find amongst the twoleg's belongings.

Drizzle had healed; but, as Brokensong had feared, she had internal injuries. Some mornings she would cough up blood, or she could barely find the energy to breathe.

Pineheart no longer felt nauseated by the constant roll of the boat along the waves. He had even ventured onto the deck a couple of times the past few nights. It had calmed him to see Silverpelt stretched across the night sky, as calm and serine as ever.

Everyone had been aware that the weather they had become accustomed was not the same. The typical cool, alpine breeze had dwindled. At the start of every new day, they were greeted with heat that only got worse with time.

Captain had informed them that this was the path the ship always took down the coast. Soon, they would stop at their destination.

"Hey, would you come take a walk with me?" Elkleap's deep meow snapped him out of his trance.

"Err.. yeah," he replied hastily. Elkleap shot him a questioning glance but didn't say a thing as they trotted out of the doorway. After a short climb up the stairs, they leaped out into the intense sunshine that beat down onto the deck.

Pineheart could hear the constant splash of the waves as they slapped against the boat. There were no twolegs out here now. Or

where they Dockworkers?

Everything's just so different out here, he thought in distress.

The pair started to take a straight path beside the raised railing on the edge of the deck. The salty tang of sea air washed over Pineheart's nose.

"What was it you wanted to talk about?" He inquired.

Elkleap slowed and turned his head to look at Pineheart. He could see that his eyes were still haunted, void of emotion after Sun'ka's death.

But she could have survived, Pineheart reminded himself. But that was unlikely.

"I wanted to just tell you... how much I appreciate you still being here with us," Elkleap murmured, "I know it was hard to leave Blizzardstar, and our home. I didn't realize that until I had Sun'ka."

Pineheart's heart twisted at his words. "I never really had a family. My mother died when I was young, and my father never really wanted anything to do with me," he confessed.

"Shimmerpaw was my first apprentice," he continued, "I was finally starting to know what it felt like to truly care about another cat."

Elkleap shut his eyes and turned to face away for a few moments. Pineheart could see his tail as it shivered with depression. Pineheart stepped closer and touched his tailtip to his companion's side.

"I could have believed we would have stayed on the Docks with Sun'ka," Elkleap whispered.

"I think we all could have," Pineheart admitted, "and now they had to come with us."

"Do you think they'll want to join IceClan permanently?" Elkleap wondered out loud.

Pineheart realized that he hadn't really thought about that. Olive

and Smog hadn't really tried to interact much with the Clan cats since the ship's departure. Talon had stuck close to Sootsplash and Lionpaw. Pineheart knew he still harbored guilt for Meadowshine's disappearance.

He was fairly certain Stone and Lily would want to stay in their new home. They had always been kind and friendly towards all of the IceClan cats.

"We will just have to see," Pineheart replied. He turned his head to the right to look through the railing at the edge of the boat. All he could see was the endless roll of the ocean.

To their surprise, they could detect the patter of pawsteps as someone approached from behind. Pineheart glanced back to see the multi colored pelt of Captain.

His slender legs glided over the wooden deck, his thin tail waved in the air behind him. "You seem to have finally acquired your sea legs," he teased.

"We just came out for a private chat," Elkleap replied casually.

"Oh, well don't let me interrupt you," he laughed as he started to trot past the two warriors.

A lone seagull cried out as it soared past the massive wooden ship. Captain looked up as it passed, his eyes fixed on the white feathered bird.

"They usually only screech like that when we are getting close to land," Captain observed, "should be there by tomorrow morning."

Pineheart reared back onto his hind legs in an attempt to see a shape in the distance. But the usual blue and green blanket of the ocean was all he could see.

"We should go tell the others," Elkleap remarked as he stood to leave.

Captain snickered softly, his elegant whiskers bobbed with the rhythm. "There's no reason to rush. We can just relax in the sun for

now," he offered.

Elkleap rolled his eyes, "don't you get tired of sunbathing all day?" he retorted gently.

Captain lifted a paw and drew it up over his ears. A purr escaped his parted jaws. "Don't you get tired of being high strung all day?" Captain responded.

Pineheart had to suppress a giggle. Captain had certainly gotten used to their company. Elkleap narrowed his eyes, ready to deliver a hasty retort. But Captain was faster.

"Besides, I would imagine you'd want to rest as much as you can before we reach land. From what I've heard, you have lots of work to do once we get to shore," Captain pointed out.

"Yeah... a warrior's work is never done," Elkleap confirmed, "we will have to find a new camp and make sure to scout the land for danger."

Captain's face twisted with disgust. "That sounds like *a lot* of work," he spat.

Elkleap swished his tail, his whiskers twitched with amusement. "I guess that means you wouldn't want to join us?" he guessed.

"Ahh, no... I couldn't leave the twolegs and the ocean," he replied, "besides, I'm sure a gator would snap me up in a heartbeat."

Gator. The word rang in his ears, louder than the crash of the waves.

Elkleap didn't seem to notice the sea cat's unknown word. He turned around to face towards the doorway back down into the hull.

"Well, I still should go and talk to the others," he insisted, "we will have to figure out what we are going to do once we arrive."

"Whatever," Captain murmured.

The calico tom bounded away in the direction of the front of the

boat. Elkleap already started to pad away, through the entryway and down into the hull.

Pineheart wasn't sure he wanted to descend into the darkness just yet. He quickly leaped after Captain's trail.

He found the tom perched precariously on the bow of the ship. He overlooked the ocean as the ship's body blasted through the heave of the waves.

"Is it safe to be up there?" Pineheart asked seriously as he neared.

"If it wasn't, do you think I'd be up here?" he retorted.

Carefully, Pineheart pulled himself up onto the long, wooden beam beside Captain. The view shocked him into silence. The sun had started to set, the sky splashed with rays of orange and a deep red. The soft blue smear of the ocean stretched into the distance.

But, there was something else there too. A barely noticeable speck against the skyline. "We will be there by morning," Captain remarked as he stared at the endless expanse of ocean.

"Is there a lot of dangerous stuff there?" Pineheart asked warily. He remembered Captain's remark about the gators. But what other dangers would await them?

"The world is full of dangerous stuff," Captain purred, "the key is to learn to live alongside it. I'm sure you will all be fine."

Pineheart closed his eyes as a fierce breeze overtook his senses. It smelled faintly of lush vegetation, but also the tangy sting of smoke.

"I wish I could feel that way," Pineheart murmured.

Captain sighed as he reached his tail around to rest against Pineheart's side. "You have traveled far. I have no doubt this island is where you're supposed to be. Don't deny that your ancestors have led you to the perfect home."

Pineheart leaned into Captain's silky fur. He breathed in deeply as he imagined how their lives would change once more.

After a few more moments of thought, he finally opened his eyes once more. The speck still hovered at the edge of his vision. "I believe you," he whispered.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The morning came quick to the cats that slept down in the darkness of the hull. Frostfeather shook the tiredness from her limbs as she stretched. They had been awoken by the twolegs, who shouted and stomped along the wooden deck overhead.

Elkleap had told them all that previous night, that they should reach land soon. Captain had told them that the twolegs would yell back and fourth when they could see the rise of earth. And, indeed, the shape of an island practically loomed before them.

"As soon as you walk into the open, you'll want to run down the ramp as fast as you can! If they think one of their mousers escaped, they'll try to catch you!" Captain reminded them.

"I'm sure we will be fine," Falcon replied from his place beside the calico tomcat. Next to him, Stone and Lily nodded their heads in agreement.

Brokensong and Blue stood adjacent to Drizzle, who was stooped over as she caught her breath. Frostfeather wondered if she would even be able to run. Smog and Olive had only just gotten up, but had now padded over to join Stone and Lily with the others.

Pineheart and Elkleap hovered near the doorway, where dawn light cascaded down onto the wooden floor in front of them. She had grown used to the sticky heat that had increased in intensity with the start of every new day.

The loud racket of seagulls echoed down the stairway as they circled the massive sails of the ship. Frostfeather closed her eyes. She wondered if she could even remember what her old home looked like.

The sting of snow and ice on her paw pads was just a distant memory now. As she started to lose herself amongst her thoughts, Captain called out to his stowaway companions.

"We should be docking any moment now!" he cried, "you will want to run to the front of the boat! There, you will find the ramp that will take you down to the surface!"

Frostfeather narrowed her eyes as Sootsplash guided Lionpaw closer to the entranceway. All they needed now was the signal to flee!

The boat sounded it's loud, guttural horn. Everyone was jolted forward as the vessel slammed to a halt. "Now! You'll want to run before the twolegs come," Captain shouted.

Elkleap exchanged a glance with the multi colored tom before he turned and ran up the short stretch of stairs. Sootsplash and Lionpaw were directly behind him, their trails streamed behind them in their haste. Blue and Brokensong held Drizzle aloft between them, her paw tips barely touched the ground.

Stone and Lily came next, closely followed by Falcon. Frostfeather lingered next to Captain for a moment as she prepared herself for her mad dash across the ship. "I'm glad I could meet you," Captain confessed, "I don't doubt that one day, we will meet again."

Pineheart was last to exit the spacious hull. All that left was the white she-cat. She nodded a quick farewell to Captain and shot after her Clanmates. As she burst out onto the deck, she was relieved to see that twolegs still hadn't come to swarm the wooden surface.

The ramp was down at the head of the boat, as flimsy and wobbly as before. Frostfeather flew down the plank. Her paws instantly sunk into soft, sunbaked sand.

She glanced up to watch her companions bound across the pristine beach. Inland from the seashore, a massive wall of rock stretched upward towards the sky. It spanned many foxlengths, impossible for any cat to climb. But at the top of the rock, tropical trees towered like skyscrapers.

The small band of cats started to approach the vertical cliff face. Frostfeather glanced back to find that no twolegs had dared to follow them.

"I think it's safe!" she called.

At the head of the group, Elkleap started to slow down. Despite the apparent lack of danger, he kept the pace brisk. He had started to scan the rocky facade for any sort of valley that would allow them to go up towards the center of the island.

"We could try and find some branches to climb up," Falcon offered. Frostfeather looked straight up to see that some spindly branches stuck out from the side of the cliff.

Elkleap stopped, the entire patrol slowed behind him. "That's too dangerous," he dictated, "I highly doubt Drizzle would be able to make the climb,"

Falcon dipped his head. "You're right," he conceded.

The sand had slowly begun to burn Frostfeather's paw pads. With a hiss, she lifted her paws one by one. But relief from the heat was only momentary.

Up ahead, Drizzle groaned in pain. Frostfeather peeked around the group and watched as Drizzle hunched over to cough up tiny specks of blood into the ground.

"We need to find shelter as soon as possible," Brokensong insisted, "Drizzle needs to rest."

Lionpaw has wandered from Sootsplash's side so she may walk beside Blue. She stared at Drizzle as she hacked up more crimson droplets.

"She will be ok, right?" Lionpaw whimpered.

Blue shrugged, his eyes dark with worry. "We need herbs," he replied simply.

Stone and Lily broke off from the others to bound over to the water's edge. They dabbed their paws into the ocean and brought them back up to their mouths.

After a few seconds, they charged back to their companions. "We

can't drink this water either," Stone explained, "it's too salty!"

Elkleap groaned as he turned to look back along the endless wall of stone. "We just have to keep moving," he decided. The sun had already crested the center of the sky and had descended behind the precipice.

Everyone started to walk once more. Frostfeather noticed that Pinheart had begun to pant heavily as the sun bore down onto his black fur. No one complained of the heat as they continued to look for shelter along the vertical mountain.

After what felt like a lifetime, Elkleap called out from the head of the group. "I see a cave!"

He picked up his pace to a run. The cats in tow bounced along as they streaked towards the cave opening. A blueish shimmer signaled where the cave rested along the edge of the sand.

As they neared, Elkleap dared to pad close to peer into the entrance. His brown and black fur was illuminated with teal light that shone from the depths of the cavern.

"I don't scent anything off," he reported as he turned back to the others.

Without hesitation, Brokensong led Drizzle into the darkness. Elkleap, Blue, and Lionpaw were right behind them. Pineheart, Falcon, Stone, and Lily followed. No one really wanted to spend any more time in the intense sunlight.

Sootsplash lingered at the entrance, his gaze fixed on the calm roll of the ocean. Frostfeather stopped at his side for a second, her expression gentle as she rested her muzzle on his shoulder.

"Are you thinking of Meadowshine?" she asked softly.

She heard his breath hitch in his throat at the mention of his mate. His shoulders quivered as he replied, "Yes.. she and Shimmerpaw should have been here... they should have made it to our new home," he choked.

Frostfeather pulled back to look into his sorrowful eyes. She wished she could say something to comfort him, but no words came.

The sting of the sand had receded. Her mind started to wander as she thought of all their Clanmates that *should have* been here.

Sootsplash touched his nose briefly to her cheek before he turned and padded into the cave. Frostfeather followed him.

Inside, the floor had changed from the grainy sand to a solid, gray stone. At the very back of the cave, a massive cluster of aquamarine gems stretched from the floor and up to the ceiling. It cast a teal shade over the pelts of the gathered cats.

Drizzle had already slumped into a heap near the base of the gemstones, Brokensong and Blue at her side. Lionpaw has rejoined Sootsplash near the cavern wall, stuck close to his side like cobwebs.

Stone and Lily had padded close to the aquamarine, their eyes wide as they marveled at its beauty. Elkleap had already lay down near the opposite wall, his head still raised to stay alert in case of danger.

Pineheart padded over to join him, his tail swished low as he sat beside the brown and black warrior. Frostfeather decided to join them.

"We should try and rest until morning. I hadn't expected we would wander so long to find someplace sheltered," Elkleap remarked.

"Do you think StarClan will tell us where to go?" Pineheart asked quietly.

"I hope so," Elkleap murmured as he tucked his nose underneath his forepaw. His eyes closed as he tried to to fall asleep.

Pineheart didn't object as he curled into a tight ball beside him. Frostfeather knew she should try to rest, but exhilaration still surged through her veins. *We finally made it*, she thought with relief, *this has to be our home.*

The others took a good bit of time to settle down before they fell asleep. Outside, the sky had darkened as the beach was doused in night. Silverpelt stretched across the horizon, as bright and powerful as it was in the pine forest.

The usual sounds of crickets did not grace her ears. Instead, harsh growls and screeches of brings unknown barraged her senses. Eventually, she fell into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Radiant sea green light filled the cavern the cats had rested in. Soft murmurs and the sound of paws as they shifted in the sand was enough to jolt Elkleap into wakefulness.

His eyes widened as the immense shine of starlight filled the cave. The shimmery, star studded figures of his ancestors surrounded him. It seemed like his companions were still frozen in their dreams, with no inclination of what was about to occur.

"Have StarClan come to share something with me?" he inquired. Bubbly excitement surged over him as Blizzardstar padded forward from the crowd. The white pelted StarClan cat turned to sweep his gaze over the other ancient cats, his head held high.

"Yes, I think we are all here," Blizzardstar confirmed as he came to look back at Elkleap.

The warrior stretched aside to see just how many cats were truly present. He saw many familiar faces but even twice as many that were unrecognizable. Some of the ancient cats seemed to be covered in a malignant fog, instead of the usual comfort of starshine.

Blizzardstar waited until he had the tom's attention before he continued. "We have come to welcome you home! This is the island where IceClan will live in peace for generation upon generation."

Elkleap purred, his tail thumped happily against the chilly rock of the cavern floor as he replied. "We haven't seen very much of it yet.. but I'm sure it is truly magnificent," Elkleap rejoiced, "we are truly thankful."

Blizzardstar dipped his head diplomatically. "And StarClan thanks *you,"* he purred, "you have faced more hardships than most would have been able to endure."

Elkleap flattened his ears, slightly embarrassed. Blizzardstar continued to speak. "I know you wanted to stay on the docks with Sun'ka. I wish that it could have been possible, but that was not IceClan's destiny."

Elkleap's eyes glittered with sadness at the mention of Sun'ka. It burned his heart to think about the fiery she-cat. "We have come to you today, to commend you for your devotion to IceClan!" Blizzardstar exclaimed.

The gathered StarClan cats started to cheer in agreement. Elkleap closed his eyes as he basked in their praise. "And now that IceClan has a new home, they will need a new leader," Blizzardstar continued, "and it really should be you."

Elkleap gasped in astonishment, "me? Why me?"

Blizzardstar rolled his eyes, "I don't think any cat has sacrificed as much as you, and still held their faith in StarClan. I had hoped that Frostfeather would have embraced a leadership role. With the dreams she had, I thought it was her destiny."

Elkleap remembered when they had left, how Blizzardstar told his daughter to take control of IceClan. But it *had* been him. Without any complaints or objections.

"I am humbled by your decision," Elkleap murmured.

Blizzardstar stepped closer to the brown and black warrior. He raised his voice so that all the assembled StarClan cats could hear him.

"I will give Elkleap his first life, as I was leader before him," he called. The white pelted tom extended his neck, and Elkleap reached forward to touch his nose to the old tom's.

"With this life, I give you the confidence to make even the hardest decisions, even if it means you must forge your own path. The Clan will depend on the choices you make." Blizzardstar's voice hummed in Elkleap's ears.

It felt like a world of possibilities spread in front of Elkleap's senses

as Blizzardstar grew quiet. He could feel the confidence as it surged through his limbs. *Yes, I will make all of IceClan's decisions,* Elkleap thought.

Blizzardstar dipped his head and stepped back, quickly replaced by the familiar calico coat of Spottedrose. She was as youthful as ever, her spotted pelt shined with the strength of everlasting starlight.

"Greetings, Elkleap," she purred. Just like Blizzardstar, Spottedrose came forward to touch her nose with the soon-to-be leader.

As their noses connected, she began to speak. "With this life, I give you the compassion to cherish cats of all different walks of life. They may be strange, but their differences are what makes them strong."

A warm sensation crept up Elkleap's legs. He recalled the Dock cats, and the elusive Captain aboard the wooden ship. Indeed, their differences had helped them survive for season upon season.

As Spottedrose stepped away, the warm sensation receded. The next cat to step forward was unexpected to say the least. It was Hawkslash. "My son, I never expected that you would one day lead IceClan," the brown tabby confessed.

"You were too busy trying to pick fights with BreezeClan," Elkleap snorted, "I was lucky if you ever even paid attention to me after Galewing died."

Another cat walked up to Hawkslash's side. Her fur was as dark as night, but still shined with the same glow of all StarClan ancestors.

"You should forgive your father, like I have," Galewing purred, "we are very proud."

Elkleap dipped his head, "I suppose I should," he agreed.

Hawkslash took a step closer and rested his nose against Elkleap's. "With this life, I give you the strength to see passed rivalries. Sometimes aggression is better met with empathy and kindness."

Elkleap's resentment towards his father crumbled like sand beneath

his paws. "I forgive you," Elkleap breathed as Hawkslash and Galewing stepped back into the crowd.

The cat that followed was small, with dusky gray fur. She bounced forward, her tail high in the air behind her. "Shimmerpaw.." Elkleap whispered, grief threatened to overwhelm him.

"Don't be sad," Shimmerpaw chimed, "you were the best mentor I could have asked for!"

Her blue eyes shined with love as she stretched on her paw tips to touch her nose to Elkleap's. "With this life, I bestow you the gift of training young cats in the ways of our new home. The island is still shrouded in unknown, but it will be *you* that establishes the knowledge IceClan needs to survive for many years to come."

Exhilaration burst through Elkleap's body. He could see himself as he trained apprentice after apprentice. The shapes and scents of many unknown plants and creatures crowded at the edge of his vision.

"Thank you," he breathed as she started to step away.

The apprentice made her way to the recognizable tortoiseshell fur of Meadowshine. As the small cat sat, Meadowshine stood and made her way towards Elkleap. His heart started to beat uncomfortably in his chest as he laid his eyes upon her.

"Sootsplash misses you," he blurted, his fur hot and clammy against his skin.

"I know," she purred, "and I miss him. But I have not come to discuss my mate. I am here to give you your fifth life. I gift you the confidence to leave the fate of your Clan in the paws of even the youngest cats. For when it is our time to join StarClan, it is our kits who will carry on the legacy of IceClan."

A calm resolve resonated in Elkleap's belly as he felt the life course through him. He could feel his whole life flash by in the blink of an eye. He knew IceClan would survive, many seasons beyond his death.

He hadn't realized that Meadowshine had already padded away until another brown tabby figure replaced her. His chestnut fur was encased in a black fog, his scent similar to the stench of blood and decay. It took Elkleap a moment to recognize him, for he was only an apprentice when he had joined StarClan.

"You're Mudstar, right?" he asked simply.

"Yes, you are correct. I was leader before Blizzardstar," he replied, "I do not share the same skies as StarClan. But I am greatful they allowed me to come, to give you this life."

Mudstar rested his muzzle on the top of Elkleap's head, his eyes closed as he recited his portion of the ceremony, "with this life, I give you the strength to admit and own up to your mistakes. Not every decision you make as leader will be the right one. Don't let it discourage you."

This life felt like a cool mountain breeze through Elkleap's fur. He dipped his head to the Dark Forest warrior, his tail swished against the ground behind him.

Mudstar backed away and disappeared into the shadows at the edge of the cavern. But another Dark Forest cat advanced to take his place. Elkleap felt shock overwhelm him but he did not object as the bulky form of Oakstar stepped before him.

"You look surprised," Oakstar chuckled after a few moments of silence.

Elkleap's muscles stiffened as the old BreezeClan leader slunk forward to touch noses. "With this life, I give you the ability to feel content with differing opinions. Some things you may think are best for the Clan, may not be best for everyone. Sometimes your Clanmates will challenge you. You should not feel anger, but instead feel pride in your warriors."

Elkleap felt his heart swell with pride as Oakstar finished. He had never expected that cats from the Place of No Stars would give him lives, but they were welcome all the same.

As Oakstar disappeared from sight, Elkleap waited for the last cat to step forward. He could hear someone's pawsteps as they crashed through the cave entrance and pushed their way through the assembled crowd.

"I'm here! I'm here!" the newcomer shouted as he padded into sight.

Elkleap's jaw dropped open as he saw Cairn cross the space between himself and the StarClan cats. "Your ancestors came to get me! They wanted me to take part in your strange tradition!" Cairn beamed with happiness as he came closer to Elkleap.

The tom didn't have time to speak before Cairn bent forward and brushed his nose against Elkleap's. "With this final life, I give you the determination to never be afraid of the unknown. If you embrace what you find in the shadows, it will make you stronger as a group."

It felt like a thick fog clouded Elkleap's mind but, like a gust of air, it was swept away in a moment's notice.

A purr throbbed in Elkleap's chest as he opened his eyes to gaze at Cairn. "I'm sorry I could not save Sun'ka," he confessed.

"Sun'ka is fine," Cairn purred, "it is not time for her to join the stars just yet."

Sweet relief erupted within him. *Sun'ka is alive!*

All around him, the StarClan and Dark Forest cats started to yowl and cheer in celebration. "Elkstar! Elkstar! Elkstar!"

The new leader closed his eyes as he basked in the chants of his ancestors. But after several heartbeats, the cave became quiet.

Elkleap opened his eyes to see that he was once more alone. His Clanmates snored and shifted in their sleep around him. He turned towards the massive vein of Aquamarine that stretched across the back wall of the cavern.

It seemed to throb with the intensity of the stars, which still shined in the night sky outside. Elkstar decided he would wait until the

Clan awoke to tell them the news.

I am leader of IceClan!

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The soft murmur of the sea's wake woke Frostfeather close to dawn. The brilliant shimmer of the aquamarine still emanated over its inhabitants, no weaker with the sign of the sun on the horizon. It doused the cats in a blue-green sheen.

As Frostfeather started to shake the numbness of sleep from her senses, she noticed Elkleap as he sat like a stone near the cavern entrance. His shoulders rippled as he lifted his muzzle to sniff the breeze over the roll of the ocean.

Quietly, she got to her paws and tiptoed across the stone to his side. He looked over at her as she sat, his gaze intense and serious.

"Good morning," he purred as his tail swept around to gently touch Frostfeather's leg. Outside, the beach hummed with life as tiny creatures swarmed across the sand.

She felt content to sit in silence as she marveled at the vast biology of their new home. A thick shelled turtle, similar to the turtles of the forest but at least three times as big, tumbled from the waves and started to pull itself atop the sand.

A bird, with feathers as vibrant as the sunset and as green as the freshest leaves, landed briefly before it extended its wings and flew back up towards the top of the cliff. Scents unlike Frostfeather had ever smelled filled the air around them.

"Something happened last nite," Elkleap stated. Frostfeather glanced towards him, her ears twitched in curiosity.

"What happened?" she asked quietly. Behind them, she could hear the sound of cats as they stirred and awoke.

"StarClan visited me," he explained, "and names me new leader of IceClan!"

She could see the excitement shine in the depths of his eyes, his muscles taught with renewed strength. Relief flooded over her, that their ancestors have shared with them after so long.

"Elkstar.." Frostfeather mumbled. His new name felt weird on her tongue, but it was so welcome as if that's what it had always been.

"Elkstar?" Brokensong echoed as she approached the pair from her side of the cave. "Is what you say true? You are leader of IceClan?"

Elkleap's whiskers quivered with amusement as he replied, "do you think I would lie about such a thing?"

Brokensong bowed her head. "I suppose not," she responded lightly. Her eyes were wide as she looked at the tom, full of delight and wonder.

"Everyone, come here!" she called out to their companions. In the depths of the space, the others slowly slunk towards the entrance where they sat.

Elkstar's tail curled to wrap around his paws as he dipped his head to his group. "We are truly blessed by the will of StarClan on this day," he began, "last night they walked in my dreams, and gave me the nine lives of a leader."

The Clan cat's tails raised in happiness but the Dockside cats seemed confused. "So you're leader now? Just like that?" Lily questioned as she stepped closer to sniff Elkstar's pelt.

"Typically, our new leader visits the Fire Stone to commune with StarClan. There, they receive their nine lives and new name as leader," he explained, "I think that means that this cave, is our new Fire Stone."

Brokensong's attention snapped to the back of the cave, where the massive aquamarine stone loomed like a blueish shadow behind them. "I should have known this was the place," Brokensong quietly scolded herself.

A purr rose in Elkstar's throat. "That means all we need is a camp," he added.

"We need to get up to the top of the precipice," Falcon offered, "there seems to be plenty of vegetation up there."

"Maybe if we keep walking around the outside, we will find a place to climb up," Pineheart guessed.

Elkstar nodded as he turned to look back out onto the sandy beach. The early morning light had strengthened. It bathed the island in its intense heat.

"We will need to hurry," Elkstar meowed, "I don't think we will find any prey down here."

Everyone murmured their agreement and after several moments, they set off back onto the shore. Drizzle seemed to be a tad better, her eyes shined as she plodded along in front of Blue, who kept a stern eye on her progress.

Pineheart had been mostly silent but now he walked along at Frostfeather's shoulder with a smirk on his face. "Aren't you happy that Elkstar is leader?" he asked, "it feels nice to know that the Clan is almost back to normal."

"Almost," Frostfeather agreed. All they needed was a safe spot to camp, with fresh water. But certainly, if StarClan sent them here, there had to be *somewhere* to establish a new camp.

Elkleap kept the group close to the cliff face, the sun angled towards them as it coated the rock in its vibrant rays. The screech of a bird erupted in the trees above them, which made a few cats glance towards the clifftop with hungry expressions.

Steady progress eventually brought them to a massive valley, with crumble down rocks that made it easy to hop up. Elkleap instructed Pineheart to climb first, so that he could pull Drizzle up onto the safety of the gentle slope.

Once her paws were firmly planted, Brokensong and Blue jumped up next. After them; Stone, Falcon, Lily, Sootsplash, Lionpaw, and Frostfeather took their turns to leap up the tumbled stones. Elkstar watched in the rear, intent to find any danger before it approached

the distracted cats. But no danger came.

Elkstar bounded up the small rock pile with little effort. He took the lead again as he started to lead his group towards the tree line. Soft grass already graced their paw pads, the beach receded into the distance as they trudged up the small hill.

Tropical trees waved in the breeze before them, the canopy as high as even the tallest trees in their old forest home. Here, the guttural growls and high pitched shrieks of the native animals was strongest. It assaulted Frostfeather's ears, louder than anything she could imagine.

The group huddled closer as they embarked further into the unknown jungle. The foliage grew incredibly thick after only a short time, which made it hard to travel at a steady pace.

"I never imagined we'd end up in a place like this," Sootsplash marveled from behind Frostfearher. She looked back at the tom and noticed he gazed at his surroundings with barely concealed amazement.

"Woah!" Lionpaw gasped abruptly as she slapped her paw down onto the thick grass in front of her. She bent down; and when she straightened, a tiny fury creature hung from her jaws.

"Do you think it's safe to eat?" Pineheart asked as the patrol grew close to admire Lionpaw's lucky catch. The creature looked strange; sort of like a mouse and a vole had crossed.

"I would assume so," Elkleap stated as he lowered his head to sniff the prey.

"You can share it with Drizzle, if you're hungry," the leader offered as he turned to look at the young silver she-cat.

Drizzle's mouth watered as the prey scent washed over her. Lionpaw must have noticed her expression, for she shook her head. "No, Drizzle can have it," she insisted.

Elkstar nodded and picked up the freshkill. He set it carefully at Drizzle's paws, while the injured she-cat eagerly bent over to take

her first bite.

Everyone waited for her to finish before they set off again. Pineheart, Falcon, and Elkstar kept their eyes fixed on the landscape around them, their muscles tense as they kept watch for predators. Still, no trouble arose.

Drizzle licked her jaws, her mouth still bloody from her prey. "Thank you, Lionpaw," she burped as she brushed her muzzle against Lionpaw's cheek.

The tawny apprentice purred in response as she nuzzled Drizzle's shoulder in turn. With no time to waste, Elkstar continued to lead the patrol further into the noisy jungle.

Above them, a furry creature cackled as it swung from the vines between the trees. Elkstar stared after it as it faded into the distance.

Further and further they journeyed, until they eventually neared a thick wall of shrubs. They were laden with a foreign scent, sharp and tangy like the smell of freshly plucked herbs. Brokensong drew close to sniff at the leaves.

"I wish I knew what plants were useful," she complained, her irritation was apparent.

"I'm sure StarClan will guide you in what herbs to use," Blue chimed in as his tail waived in the air behind him. A few fox lengths away, Elkstar had found a gap between the thickly woven branches.

"Everyone, I found something!" he shouted as he stuck his head through the hole. The cats ran towards him, their ears pricked as they wondered what their leader had found.

After a moment, Elkleap lowered himself and slid underneath the bush. Pineheart approached first, and immediately crouched down and crept through. After a short time, everyone had crawled through the opening.

On the other side, a wide clearing opened up at their paws. Off to the right, more bushes lined the edge; large enough to make many,

spacious dens. To the left, a gigantic tree sprouted and stretched into the sky, taller than most of the other trees that had grown around them. At its base, shadows covered the entrance to a cave.

Directly adjacent to the tree, a spring trickled from a crack in a large boulder. The spring rand for a few rabbit hops towards the center of the clearing, which ended in a small, rounded pool of water.

Everyone was silent as they surveyed their surroundings. But then, Elkstar finally spoke, "this is it... we are finally home!"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

IceClan was blessed with little issues as they started to form the basis of their camp. The clearing they had stumbled upon was truly perfect, down to every last detail.

The bushes that lined the edges were so thick, the only way in or out was the small entrance tunnel they had come through. Elkstar had given Lionpaw the duty of finding sticks to lodge beneath the branches to make the hole larger.

Sootsplash and Falcon were tasked to bring any vines they could find back to camp, to weave between the branches of the dens. It had been slow work at first, but the camp finally took form.

Pineheart sat alone, next to one of the leafy branches that jutted from the warrior's den. He had only slept there for a few nights, but it already felt like home. Inside, there was enough room for at least two dozen fluffy, moss nests.

He was quiet, deep in thought, as the clearing started to stir to life at the start of a new day. Elkstar appeared from the depths of a deep hole near the far side of the camp. He had made his den in the abandoned hollow, which allowed Brokensong to claim the hidden cave among the roots of the tree that towered on the opposite side of the space.

Here, she could treat her patients in privacy. The spring that dripped nearby would suffice as a water source to give any cat too injured to walk to the pool in the center of the clearing.

As if I'm cue, Brokensong's slender face appeared from between the tangled roots. Pineheart could hear Blue's voice as he called out behind her, and the medicine cat turned and disappeared back into her den.

He knew the she-cat had still not received signs from the ancestors on what herbs she needed. But that didn't stop her optimism. She

had ventured into the jungle only just yesterday, with Falcon and Stone to guard her. Surprisingly, she returned with the familiar leaves of coltsfoot and catmint.

Meanwhile, Elkstar had been busy as he organized the daily hunting patrols. No concrete boundaries had yet been set, so there was no need for border patrols for now.

The freshkill pile, which was placed only a few foxlengths away from the camp's center, overflowed with the warm bodies of prey. It almost felt suspicious, with how well things were going.

But Pineheart wouldn't take it for granted. He took a deep breath to prepare himself for his daily jobs. Elkstar headed straight towards him, his eyes bright and his ears perked and alert.

"Good morning," he beamed, his throat throbbed with the force of a deep purr.

"Good morning," Pineheart replied. Beside him, he could hear some of the others as they stirred in their nests.

"I'd like you to lead a hunting patrol," Elkstar instructed, "after Stone and Olive get up, you can take them too."

Pineheart nodded, "sure thing."

But before Elkstar padded away, he leaned in close to whisper in Pineheart's ear. "Just make sure you're back by sunhigh," he murmured.

His whiskers twitched with curiosity but he did kept his mouth shut as Elkstar stood and trotted away towards the medicine den.

Eventually, Pineheart could hear a single cat push through the branches of the warrior's den. It was Frostfeather.

"When did you start waking up before me?" she teased as she flicked her tail over Pineheart's snout. He snorted as he lifted his paw to bat at her tailtip.

"Maybe you've just gotten lazy," he replied cheekily.

Frostfeather let out a *mrrow* of laughter, her whiskers twitched playfully. "Yeah and hedgehogs fly.." she grunted.

As they talked, Olive and Stone finally emerged alongside the others. Pineheart stepped aside to intercept them.

"Elkstar wants us on a hunting patrol," he explained.

Stone gave an eager bounce, despite the sleep that still hung in her eyes. Sootsplash gave a slight nod in response. All the other cats made their way to the fresh kill pile, which quickly depleted the mound to only a few shriveled remains.

"Alright, let's go!" Pineheart called as he made his way to the camp entrance and pushed his way out into the jungle.

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Sunhigh came quicker than expected. Pineheart had urged his campmates along, Elkstar's whispered message still rang in his ears. His jaw ached with the weight of his prey, which mostly consisted of birds with feathers as bright as the evening sky.

Stone had actually found a tiny den of mice, which she carried proudly at the rear of the patrol. Olive had encountered some small lizards, but they were too fast for her clumsy paws.

Pineheart forced his way back into camp, the bush's branches scraped angrily over his fur. As he emerged into the open, he was startled to see that everyone had gathered beside the pool at the center of camp. Beside the water's edge, Elkstar sat with his head held high.

The hunting patrol quickly ran forward to deposit their prey before they joined their campmates at the outside of the crowd. Elkstar must have noticed their arrival, for he began to speak.

"My friends, this is my first time calling a Clan meeting as leader," he remarked, "but I feel I have a very special task to complete today."

The gathered cats exchanged confused glances, but kept quiet as
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Elkstar continued. "I have no doubt that the worst is behind us! We have finally found our home, where StarClan promised we would be safe from harm!"

His gaze traveled proudly over his Clanmates, his eyes shined with immeasurable happiness. "So, on this day, I will name my deputy!"

Anxious murmurs swept over the cats as they tried to guess who it would be. Elkstar's expression gave nothing away as he started to recite the traditional words of all Clan cats.

"I say these words before all of StarClan, so they may hear and approve my choice," he meowed, "Pineheart will be the new deputy of IceClan!"

Pineheart felt his heart clench with surprise. His Clanmates all turned to him with purrs of congratulation. Near the front of the group, Frostfeather's voice rose with affection for her brother. "Pineheart! Pineheart!"

The rest of the Clan joined her chant. "Pineheart! Pineheart! Pineheart!"

He could feel his heart as it slammed in his chest. His breath came in fast, shallow gasps, but honor as fierce as fire seared his heart. "I won't let you down," he vowed as he dipped his head to Elkstar.

After the outburst died down, Elkstar once more swept his attention over the crowd. "I also wanted to preform one more ceremony," he shouted, "provided the Dockcats approve."

Falcon looked uncertain, but Stone and Lily leaped up with enthusiasm. "Anything, Elkstar," Stone purred.

"As IceClan cats, I feel it would be best if you took on Clan names," he explained, "names that reflect your skills and qualities of a warrior."

Drizzle squealed with delight, which almost made her cough with the force of her outburst. Pineheart was pleased to see Falcon as he nodded in agreement.

"Carry on," Falcon acknowledged.

Elkstar inhaled, ready to recite the words that had been burned into his memory. "The life of a Clan is not complete without the making of new warriors," he began, "it is with my humblest of duties, that I give our friends true Clan names."

First, he turned to Falcon. The muscular tom stood as rigid as stone as Elkleap continued, "Falcon, do you promise to uphold your duty as a warrior, and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

The question appeared to place a weight over Falcon's shoulders. But as he lifted his head, he stood tall as he replied, "I do."

"Then, with the power of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. From this moment on, you will be known as Falconcry!" Elkstar yowled towards the sky.

The camp erupted into similar shouts of appreciation. "Falconcry! Falconcry! Falconcry!"

Elkstar repeated the ceremony four more times. Stone took the name of Stoneflower, Lily the name of Lilystep, Olive was renamed Olivenose, Smog had changed to Smogcloud, and Drizzle was given the apprentice name of Drizzlepaw. Pineheart would become her mentor, after she was healed enough to be taken out of camp.

Brokensong pulled Blue close with her tail as Elkstar turned to address the small gray tom. "Blue, it is by my understanding that you do not wish to be a warrior like the others," he meowed.

Blue shook his head as he turned to look up into Brokensong's face. "No, I want to be a medicine cat!" he chirped.

Elkstar laughed, his shoulders bobbed with the force of his breath. "Then, it is settled. Blue will be known as Bluepaw. Brokensong will be his mentor."

Brokensong purred as she bent down to brush her nose along the top of Bluepaw's head. "You already have what it takes to be an excellent medicine cat," she murmured.

As the excitement died down, Elkstar held up his tail to gather his Clan's attention one more time. "I haven't forgotten about you," he insisted as he turned to look at Lionpaw.

She had sat patiently next to Sootsplash the entire time. But as Elkstar beckoned her closer, her whiskers twitched with anticipation.

"Lionpaw, you have been an apprentice far longer than normal," he meowed, "you faced the horrendous difficulties back in our old home, and made this journey that was thought impossible."

Lionpaw's ears flattened in embarrassment as Elkstar praised her. "I know, with Shimmerpaw and Meadowshine to look over you, StarClan has nothing but great things in store. It is with my deepest respect, that I give you your warrior name."

Again, Elkstar took a steady breath as he spoke the words that came so naturally to his mind. "Lionpaw, do you promise to uphold your duty as a warrior, and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

The whole world seemed to go silent as it waited for her response. "I do!"

"Then by this moment forward, your name shall be Lionleap!" He shouted, his gaze bright as he looked down at the slender golden she-cat. Her fur immediately fluffed in joy as the Clan called out her new name.

"Lionleap! Lionleap! Lionleap!"

As the ceremony came to a close, Elkstar grabbed prey from the freshkill pile to toss to his warriors. "Tonight, we will have a feast! IceClan will never be defeated!"

Pineheart caught a thick feathered bird that Elkstar tossed towards him. Frostfeather leaned closer, "we can share if you'd like," she whispered.

Pineheart pushed the bird closer to her paws. As the Clan tucked into their prey, it almost sounded like the jungle called out in joy

for their new inhabitants.

IceClan! IceClan! IceClan!

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Life was finally back to normal for IceClan. Every day went by without even a whiff of danger. Elkstar continued to relay any information he received from the ancestors about the beasts of the jungle.

Brokensong and Bluepaw had officially come in contact with StarClan, who showed the medicine cats what plants were safe to gather. Pineheart was relieved once the one-eyed medicine cat cleared Drizzlepaw for training.

The gray furred she-cat was eager to learn. She woke each day at the first sight of dawn. Pineheart knew she was ready to explore the jungle at last.

On this morning, he sat and waited while she exchanged a few words with Brokensong. The medicine cat given Drizzlepaw a small bundle of herbs that would preserve her strength as they patrolled.

She swiped her tongue around her jaws as she trotted towards him. "Ok, I'm ready!" she chirped. Pineheart led the way out of camp.

In the jungle, the symphony of an entire island rife with wild, exotic creatures was its loudest. Drizzlepaw flattened her ears at the noise.

"Elkstar wanted us to explore near the center of the island," he told her. She nodded to indicate she understood.

As they surged forward, Pineheart held up his tail to warn Drizzlepaw. Up ahead, a thick vine hung from the branch of nearby tree. But this vine shifted as it slithered an inch up its hidden perch.

"That's one of those... anacondas!" Pineheart informed her, "he said they are very dangerous! They will wrap around you and suffocate you."

Drizzle spat in disgust, her tail puffed out to three times its size.

"Looks mean," she muttered.

Pineheart led Drizzlepaw around the snake, in a wide arch. The beast didn't appear to stir as they passed. The pair continued deeper into the dense jungle. Scant beams of sunlight pierced the forest canopy, which smattered the earthen floor with splashed of light.

An opening at the edge of the trees came into view. Pineheart inhaled to draw any nearby scents over his tongue. He was surprised to find the gritty tang of smoke enveloped his senses.

"Wait," Pineheart instructed as he raised his tail for Drizzlepaw to halt. She stopped immediately. "It smells like fire," he hissed.

The tom took a few tentative steps towards the tree line. He could see clearly, no smoke obscured his vision. At the edge, the lush grass ended abruptly as bare soil took its place. Pineheart took a few more steps to look out further.

Near the center of the circular space, another mountain stretched even further into the air above the island. It was a lot narrower than the cliff they were on now, which overlooked the beach and ocean below. At the tip, the rock had tumbled away to form a deep crater.

"Woah," Pineheart whispered as he stared up at the might of this smoky mountain. A gust of air swept over the peak, which sent the strong odor of burnt rock to his scent glands. "We should probably go back and tell Elkstar," he insisted after a long moment.

Drizzlepaw slipped to his side to peek at what her mentor had gawked at. Surprisingly, a fit of coughing gripped her as she tilted her head to admire the mountainous structure.

Pineheart drew her aside, his tail hung over her haunches. "Let's get back to camp," he meowed as he started to urge Drizzlepaw back towards the IceClan camp.

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Frostfeather had been ordered to help reinforce the dens that morning. Sootsplash wa greatful for her assistance. He had told her
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that if she went to collect the vines, he would weave them between the branches.

Sounds good to me, she thought as she pushed her way through the camp entrance. The typical sounds of the jungle greeted her as she embarked through the trees. She knew that there was a tree near the camp barrier that was laden with low hanging vines.

She continued to make a wide circle around the bush lined barrier. Ahead, the massive shape of an elder tree loomed into view. Nimbly, Frostfearher leaped up the crooked roots to dig her claws into the trunk.

The canopy didn't start for many foxlengths, but the vines hung down low enough for her to shoot off the trunk and claw off a portion of vine. She shimmied her way a little further along the bark. As she tensed her muscles, she pushed off with all her strength.

As she zoomed passed, she hooked her claws into the soft tissue of a nearby vine. She landed with a *thump* back onto the dirt. A single stretch of vine lay on the ground in front of her.

Okay, just need to do that ten more times, she thought determinedly. She turned to look up at the treetops once more, but a loud racket sounded from the nearby undergrowth.

Frostfeather whirled around, her hackles raised as she prepared for the stranger. But it was just Pineheart and Drizzlepaw. Their flanks heaved as they fought for air.

"What happened?!" Frostfeather gasped as her Clanmates started to catch their breath.

"There's some sort of smokey mountain, at the center of the island!" Pineheart exclaimed.

Frostfeather snorted in disbelief. "Do you got bees in your brain?" she scoffed.

Drizzlepaw shook her head seriously. "No, it's true! Pineheart said we need to go back and tell Elkstar!"

Frostfeather snatched up her vine and turned to follow the two frazzled cats back to camp. As she squeezed underneath the bush behind them, she watched Pineheart disappear into Elkstar's den. His black tail tip vanished as he padded down into the tunnel.

Drizzlepaw had made her way towards Brokensong's den, but stopped just outside so she could take a few mouthfuls of the fresh spring water.

Sootsplash trotted over to Frostfeather from his place beside the apprentice's den. His face was creased with dismay. "Is this all you could find?" he asked skeptically.

"I'm sorry... Pineheart just came charging back through the jungle and distracted me," she confessed. Sootsplash rolled his eyes and pushed passed Frostfeather towards the camp entrance.

"I'll go get more vines. Just start to thread that one in with the others," he ordered. Frostfeather had to hold her tongue. She knew that Sootsplash still found it hard to cope without Meadowshine around.

He had been so proud at Lionleap's warrior ceremony, only to relapse into depression once more. With a sigh, she started to work the end of the vine through a hole in the wall of the apprentice's den.

As she busied herself, Stoneflower and Lilystep came to offer their help. Frostfeather dropped back down onto all four paws, her claws clumped with the soft flesh of the vine she had held.

"I think I'll be ok," she replied, "Sootsplash just went to get some more vines. I didn't do a good job, I guess."

Stoneflower's eyes clouded with worry as she heard what Frostfeather said. "You know he's just taking it hard right now. With things as easy as they are, it's difficult to not have all of our loved ones standing beside us," she murmured.

Frostfeather knew she was right. Even she had felt the cruel fingers of grief every once in awhile when she was reminded of all she had

lost. But there was always the future, and that spread out before them like the vast ocean water.

"Maybe we can convince him to move to the elder's den," Lilystep pointed out.

"No, I think the best thing for him is to keep busy. He needs to learn to live without her," Frostfeather grunted. Sootsplash still had much to offer IceClan, it would be foolish to confine him to the elder's den.

And he would be even more alone, she realized. He would be the only elder in all of IceClan. *He just needs to find his place,* she thought, *like we all do.*

Chapter Fourty

Pineheart plunged into Elkstar's den, his fur still bushed from his frantic dash across the island. "Elkstar!" he called into the murky darkness.

"Yes, Pineheart. I'm here," Elkstar's voice sounded, surprisingly closer than expected. It took a few heartbeats for his eyes to adjust, but he could just barely make out Elkstar's broad shoulders in the tight space.

"Did you find anything out there?" he asked curiously. Pineheart nodded hastily, his tail tip twitched with anxiety.

"Near the middle of the island, the trees do come to an end," Pineheart explained, "but there, the ground stretches out to a tall, smoking mountain!"

"A smoking mountain," Elkstar echoed, "this sounds serious. I should lead a patrol to investigate further."

"It could be dangerous," Pineheart cautioned, "the smoke threw Drizzlepaw into a coughing fit!"

Elkstar's eyes darkened with worry. "Is she ok?" he asked.

"I sent her to Brokensong. I'll have to check in on her," he replied.

Elkstar nodded, "see that you do. Meanwhile, I'll take Falconcry and Stoneflower to check out this *mountain*."

Pineheart turned and climbed out of the burrow, his fur caked with dirt from where it had brushed along the walls. Elkstar followed, and quickly trotted away to gather his patrol.

Pineheart was sort of relieved to pass that responsibility on to Elkstar. Drizzlepaw's fit had worried him more than he dared to admit. He made his way to the medicine den, not before he scooped up a small frog from the fresh kill pile.

As he approached, Drizzlepaw pulled herself out of the den between two outstretched tree roots. Pineheart set down the little frog, his whiskers twitched as Drizzlepaw slunk towards him.

"What did Brokensong say?" he asked, his face strained with unease.

"She think I just scratched my throat," Drizzlepaw replied, her voice hoarse, "she gave me some honey and ordered me to rest."

"I brought you some prey," he meowed as he pushed the frog closer to Drizzlepaw with his forepaw. She purred greatfully as she bent down and picked up the frog in her mouth.

"Thanks, Pineheart," she wheezed as she wobbled into the apprentice den. He watched her go, his eyes dark with worry.

Frostfeather must have snuck up while he was distracted. "So what did Elkstar think?" she inquired loudly in his ear.

He jumped and hissed angrily as he turned to look at her. "Do you not realize how obnoxious you are?" he grumbled.

"Oh shut up," she laughed, her whiskers twitched with barely concealed humor.

"Well, he took me a lot more seriously than you did," he argued.

"I'm sorry," she blurted, "I should have believed you."

"Yes, you should have!" he snapped, "being the deputy isn't a walk in the park!"

Elkstar worked tirelessly as leader but even some trivial matter managed to frazzle the black pelted tom. He had never known responsibility like this before.

"Well maybe you should just go relax," Frostfeather offered, "a nice nap should fix you up."

Pineheart's shoulders slumped, "a nap does sound nice," he admitted. But after a heartbeat he shook his head. "No, I should be thinking about who to send out hunting when Elkstar returns."

"Hopefully he won't be long," she mewed. While they talked Sootsplash had reappeared with a huge bundle of vines. Frostfeather briefly touched her nose to Pineheart's cheek before she turned and padded away.

"Good luck with the hunting patrol," she called over her shoulder. Finally on his own, he stood and slid towards the bank of the tiny pool at the center of camp.

He looked down at the water, his reflection painted across its still surface. Gently, he dabbed his paw into the chilly liquid. Ripples fanned our from his claw tips, his reflection distorted.

He must have sat there for a long time. Eventually, Elkstar's patrol returned and the brown and black pelted leader came to join his deputy at the bank of the pool.

"We didn't encounter any surprises," Elkstar reported. Pineheart continued to star down at the water.

"We still manage to find new things everyday," Pineheart meowed after several more moments of silence.

Elkstar nodded in agreement. "Yes, but there will come a time when we know these lands like the back of our paw. You'll see," he purred.

Pineheart shrugged his shoulders. "I guess your right," he muttered.

"And Drizzlepaw is ok?" Elkstar questioned him.

"Yes, she's fine," he replied curtly.

"Then I don't see any reason to worry. Just a bit of smoke, nothing to loose our fur over," Elkstar insisted.

Pineheart dipped his head submissively. "Yes, Elkstar." he rumbled.

"Have you decided who would go hunting?" he asked in an attempt to change the subject.

"Uh.. yeah. I'll lead a patrol with Smogcloud. I'm sure we can

manage with just the two of us," Pineheart explained.

"I believe you," Elkstar purred.

Pineheart felt his whiskers tremble with gratitude. "I know," he whispered. *Elkstar has no reason to doubt me. We make the perfect team.*

Pineheart got to his paws and started to walk away to find Smogcloud. But Elkstar halted him with a tiny mew.

"I do mean it," Elkstar repeated, "I know this place is still new and frightening, but there's no need to be worried."

Pineheart relaxed as he locked eyes with Elkstar. "I'll try," he promised.

"IceClan are strong. Anything this island throws at us, we can handle it," Elkstar continued, "after all, we are guided by StarClan."

"Thanks, Elkstar," Pineheart breathed as he turned and departed to seek out Smogcloud.

Yes, IceClan is strong once more, he thought to himself. He found Smogcloud as he lounged near the camp wall. Pineheart flicked his tail to beckon him closer.

"Hey, we're going to go hunting," he instructed casually.

"Great!" he purred. The pair padded one after the other, through the camp entrance and into the jungle that surrounded them.

"I hope I catch something new today," Smogcloud meowed excitedly as she bounded along behind Pineheart. "Olivenose always thinks she's better at me than hunting new prey!"

"We will catch whatever we find," he vowed as they made this way through the tangled undergrowth.

A swarm of black furred monkeys swung by, their long arms grasped at vines that hung from the jungle's canopy. From the far corner of the island, a guttural roar rang out between the trunks of

the trees.

IceClan is strong, he reminded himself, *we can face whatever we need to to survive.*

Epilogue

Frosty moonlight cascaded down through the entrance of Elkstar's den. All of his warriors had gone to sleep, worn out from their busy day. He knew he should try to sleep, but something stopped him.

He tucked his paws tighter underneath his chest. Silently, he wished the urge to sleep would overtake him. But it was useless.

He stared at the pool of moonlight that splashed down into the burrow in front of him. He narrowed his eyes, curious to find that tiny specks of starlight shined throughout the milky puddle.

He slowly stood and crept his way closer to the moon's reflection. As he neared, the tiny specks swirled and vanished. He blinked rapidly, unsure if he had imagined it or not.

But as he turned to return to his nest, a soft voice drifted to him from the camp clearing. Carefully, he slid from the mouth of his den. A single cat sat in the center of the space, their face pointed down towards the small pool of water.

"Hello?" Elkstar called, his heart started to thump rapidly in his chest. To his surprise, the familiar face of Shimmerpaw turned to greet him.

"Hello, Elkstar," Shimmerpaw purred, "I have come to share more knowledge with you."

Elkstar padded closer to the StarClan apprentice and sat alongside her. He looked down into the pool where a vision of the smokey mountain reflected on its surface.

"This is called a volcano," Shimmerpaw explained, "and it is as mighty and powerful as any force of nature."

"A volcano," Elkstar repeated. The word felt weird on his tongue, but most of them usually did. Such things as wolverines and

macaws still felt like he had licked sand. But he knew, with time, they would become common knowledge for the IceClan cats.

"Is there a reason it smokes?" he asked curiously, as the vision in the pool became shrouded in a thick gray cloud.

"Yes, but I fear you will not like the answer I must give you," she warned.

"What do you mean?" he blurted.

"The volcano is smoking because it is growing close to erupting," she explained.

Erupting, he wondered inwardly what that word meant. Shimmerpaw must have sensed his confusion, for she explained further. "That means the lava within is going to make the entire mountain burst. It will set the island to flame, and devour everything in its path."

Elkstar stiffened as a new vision unfolded before him. He was perched at the base of the mountain, but the ground quaked and shook beneath his paws.

He glanced upward, just in time to see the peak of the mountain explode outward with immense pressure. Massive boulders crashed to the ground beside him, followed by the relentless flow of molten hot lava.

It seared the ground as it made contact and started to rush towards Elkstar's paws. Just as it was about to engulf his paws, the vision ended abruptly. He blinked open his eyes to find himself beside Shimmerpaw once more.

Her gaze was serious as she awaited Elkstar's reaction. "What am I supposed to do if that happens?" he asked.

"It's not a matter of *if,* it's a matter of *when*," she corrected him. "But I can not give you all the answers. It is your decision, alone, that will determine the path IceClan will take."

He groaned as helplessness overwhelmed him. Shimmerpaw leaned

in close, her fur brushed against his flank.

"There's no need to worry," she soothed, "IceClan have earned this time of peace."

"Thank you for sharing this with me," he meowed diplomatically. "I should return to my nest now."

But Shimmerpaw stopped him with an extended paw. "Don't give up hope," she urged, "the waves always return to the shore."

Elkstar was about to question her; but as he blinked his eyes, he found himself tucked back into the safety of his nest.

But the soft moonlight that had reflected into his den shifted to a dark red. Elkstar shivered as he envisioned the volcano shatter, and spread its deadly lava over the surface of the island.

But we've earned our peace, he thought to himself, *and I will protect my Clan up until my very last breath.*

He closed his eyes, relieved to finally feel sleep pull him under. He decided he would tell Pineheart about his dream in the morning. But as he cradled deeper into slumber, his prophetic dream slipped further and further from his mind until it altogether vanished into his subconscious.

..:Aesthetics:..

[image] [image]

I tried my hand at making some aesthetics for Pineheart and Frostfeather today. Let me know how you like them!

..:More Aesthetics:..

[image] [image]

I was feeling creative so I did these images for Cairn and Sun'ka.
Hope you enjoy them (:

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